

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

‘MUSIC THAT ACTUALLY *MATTERS*’? POST-
INTERNET MUSICIANS, RETROMANIA AND
AUTHENTICITY IN ONLINE POPULAR MUSICAL
MILIEUX

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES
 DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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This thesis is the first academic text to apply the notion of the ‘Post-Internet’ to music, uniquely deploying the concept to stress the role that authenticity has played in contemporary online musical milieux. Using digital aesthetics and themes, Post-Internet art considers a symbiotic relationship between post-millennial youths and their technological devices that has ramifications for contemporary identity and communication. This thesis argues that Post-Internet musical cultures also exhibit these motifs. Much academic analysis of post-millennial musical milieux is narrowly focused on changes to the music industry that occurred at the turn of the millennium, or maintains that the mass archives of the Internet promote retromanic musical production. This thesis contrastingly analyses contemporary musicians that evince Post-Internet themes in their music and self-representation. One of the thesis’ original claims is that these musicians have developed an authentic representation of Post-Internet existence due to their sensitive examination of post-millennial cultural and personal experiences.

Post-Internet themes and academic debates about authenticity are presented as a key context for the textual analyses of these undertheorised Post-Internet musicians. The thesis’ multi-disciplinary focus draws on posthumanism, queer theory, notions of information overload, social media theory and representation politics. Academic works by theorists such as Simon Frith, Simon Reynolds, Nathan Jurgenson, Mark Fisher, Sarah Thornton, Richard Middleton, Adam Harper and Steve Jones are analysed. The texts explored in this thesis include albums, *YouTube* videos, social media, live performances, games and digital mixes. References to influential blogs and magazines such as *Pitchfork* and *The Fader* illustrate online reaction to these musicians and emphasise the authentic reputation that they have attained. I conducted fifteen interviews with the key musicians, exploring the perspectives of these practitioners as a means to illuminate their oeuvres.

The research spotlights, for the first time, music that self-consciously expresses Post-Internet themes to explore digital technology’s impact on identity, culture and society. One of the key original arguments offered is that these artists develop authentic representations of Post-Internet cultural and personal experience through their output and public personas. The conclusion notes that the aesthetic trend outlined here has also informed mainstream musicians, with many commercially successful artists appropriating from, and collaborating with, Post-Internet musicians in order to develop a comparably authentic representation of Post-Internet culture and identity.

Key Words: Post-Internet; Retromania; Authenticity; Online; Popular Music; Identity

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Introduction

What we do while connected is inseparable from what we do when disconnected. [...] There was and is no offline. [...] Our lived reality is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline. [We] live in an augmented reality that exists at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the off and the online (Jurgenson, 2012)

I'm more responding to the fact the Internet exists (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015)

The Internet and the computer are my school, my paints, and my gallery (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014)

The Internet is no longer 'new'. As emphasised in pieces by Jurgenson (2012; 2014), Archey and Peckham (October 2014) and Harper (September 2014; 10 September 2013), over twenty years have passed since it first became accessible to the wider public, and it has been over a decade since high-speed broadband increased connectivity yet further. This is, of course, not to suggest that the Internet is static and unchanging, or something that revolutionised communication two decades ago and has remained the same since. Digital technology evolves at a rapid pace, and each shift unquestionably brings about further changes in culture and society. There is no doubt that the Internet¹ has generated vast changes in popular music, and this has become a critical aspect of contemporary popular music studies. Yet much academic writing has focused on the ways in which the Internet has restructured popular music without moving beyond specific events that occurred in the early-2000s. For example, while leading journals such as *Popular Music*, *Popular Music and Society* and *The Journal of Popular Music Studies* dedicate increasing space to discourse about the evolving nature of the digitised music industry, debating the transformations in distribution and communication brought about by the web, emphasis is primarily placed on phenomena from the turn of the millennium such as the rise of the music website *Pitchfork*,

¹ It is worth noting briefly from the outset that terms such as 'Internet', 'net', 'web', 'digital' and 'virtual' are used relatively interchangeably throughout this thesis. They should be taken to mean the same thing: the notion of online spaces. While these words were initially coined with slightly differing meanings in mind, their ubiquity in contemporary culture has rendered them practically synonymous (hence the absence of differentiation here). Only the concept of the 'Post-Internet', also employed throughout, is specifically separated from these other terms.

the success of file-sharing network *Napster* and the prominence of mash-ups enabled by the Internet.² ⁱ The focus is too often on the idea that these events and programs are still culturally revolutionary. Indeed, celebrations of the configurability and ease-of-access that define the web's culture of sharing and downloading³ continue to proliferate, despite the fact that these elements have increasingly become an everyday – even 'passé' – part of popular music cultures (Scott, quoted in John, 2015). Many of the issues raised by these academics are now so commonplace that they seem to be barely noticed by the generation that has grown up alongside them; they apparently remain exciting, innovative and progressive primarily to those that can recall a time prior to the Internet. Mash-ups, file-sharing and social networking became, certainly by the early 2010s, 'normal' digital cultural phenomena encountered on a daily basis by web users and have subsequently entered common lexicons globally.⁴ With this being said, it is worth questioning why academic discourse regarding the digital era is so preoccupied with changes that are no longer as impactful as they once were. It raises the issue of whether contemporary music cultures and audiences are actually being investigated in a way that adequately reflects the experiences of online musical milieux in the 2010s. This thesis aims to begin that discussion by introducing the concept of the 'Post-Internet' into popular musical analysis for the first time.

As I have suggested, much academic work surrounding popular music in the 2010s has been overly dedicated to studies of practices that are now so prominent in music cultures that they no longer seem novel. Perhaps the most recognisable example of this has been the continuing importance of canonical articles such as Steve Jones' 'Music and the Internet',

² For example Katz, 2008; Montano, 2010; Fairchild, 2007; Meier, 2011; Zagorski-Thomas, 2010; Guzman and Jones, 2014; Sinnreich, 2010; Maloy, 2010; Serazio, 2008; Boone, 2013; and Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, 2012.

³ For example Stephen Witt's *How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy* (2015); Aram Sinnreich's *Mashed Up: Music, Technology and the Rise of Configurable Culture* (2010); Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola's *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (2011); Austin Kleon's *Steal Like An Artist* (2012); and Mark Amerika's *remixthebook* (2011).

⁴ This is argued by Eisentraut, 2013; Scott, 2015; Jones, March 2002; Ayers, 2006; and Mewton, 2001.

which remains a keystone for discourse about online music in 2010s popular music studies despite having been published in 2000. In what was effectively a set of guidelines for academics at the time struggling to write eloquently about the industry transformations brought about by the web, Jones (understandably and eloquently, given the date of his work's publication) argues for the same methodological and theoretical approaches to analysing music on the Internet that, I argue here, are now incompatible with a musical milieu that has changed immensely in the fifteen year period since the piece's publication. He maintains, for instance, that there should be a critical separation of the categories of 'production', 'consumption' and 'distribution' to make it more straightforward to 'aid analysis of the role network technologies play in each' (Jones, 2000, p. 217). As is argued throughout this thesis, as digital technologies have become increasingly commonplace and their systems are internalised by those born in the new millennium that grow up alongside them, attempts to differentiate between these three processes actually inhibit the potential for an acute contemporary study of the more malleable manner in which music is created and consumed online in the 2010s. However, academia continues to follow the industry-focused blueprint established by early Internet music theorists such as Jones. There is no doubt that Jones' article was innovative and significant when first produced. His progressive assertion that the 'potential for connection to a wide variety of music broaden[s] the scope of listening possibilities, but also potentially overwhelm[s] the listener with choice' (Jones, 2000, p. 218), for instance, resonates with ideas highlighted in this thesis regarding information noise⁵ and retromania.⁶ Despite these useful elements, however, the article is generally very much 'of its time' in its simultaneously celebratory and cautionary overview of then-contemporary changes in the music industry. Comments such as 'network technologies disrupt routine commercial practices' (Jones, 2000, p. 227) and frequent references to the ways in which the

⁵ See Sections Two and Nine in particular.

⁶ Retromania is a concept that is critiqued in Section One.

late-1990s/early-2000s music industry responded to the Internet's promotion of file-sharing are factually accurate, but the revelatory tone of the article is unreflective of how much these issues have ultimately become accepted parts of the musical milieu in the years that have followed.

To the detriment of popular music studies' progression through the early twenty-first century, this has not prevented many of Jones' (and similar critics') sentiments and frameworks from enduring in academia today despite their failure to encapsulate the substantial changes that have occurred in the interim. Colloquially, drawing extensively on a fifteen-year-old framework constructed when the Internet was a new phenomenon is the temporal equivalent of using academic analyses regarding the changes brought about by tape recording in the mid-1980s to describe the nuances of musical distribution at the turn of the millennium. The Internet's creation was correctly regarded by academics as an event that marked vast initial change to the industry as a whole, but for some inexplicable reason it has been assumed in the time since that those changes (that occurred two decades ago) remain novel for younger audiences that never experienced the same culture shock that the introduction of the web inspired in the 1990s. This thesis moves away from the considerable and well-worn emphasis in academia on the impact of digital technologies and file-sharing on the music industry. This has dominated discourse from post-Jones theorists such as Katz (2008), Fairchild (2007), Meier (2011), Zagorski-Thomas (2010), Sinnreich (2010), Maloy (2010) and Boone (2013), who maintain a focus on the ways in which the industry changed during the Internet's infancy (through file-sharing etc.) instead of drawing attention to the continuing shifts that the new millennium has brought about. This thesis proposes an analysis of popular musical milieux in the 2010s that is far more malleable than this. It contrastingly analyses the ways in which the digital milieu and its technological shifts have engendered aesthetic changes in the creative work of musicians that have grown up alongside them, as

well as its subsequent reception by audiences with the same experiences. It is, I argue, time for contemporary academic and journalistic work to begin to explore how the increasingly embedded practices that have been written about extensively are actually evinced in musical output and to amplify the ways in which audiences themselves engage with these elements. This is in stark contrast to the persistent critical emphasis on changes to the music industry brought about by technological advances that occurred two decades ago. Audiences and artists that have grown up alongside these devices and systems, it is suggested here, are in no way overawed or overexcited by them. Instead, these phenomena are an everyday part of their lives that have been there, if not since birth, at least since they became fully conscious of their musical surroundings. As such, it is necessary to investigate what this interdependent relationship with the Internet means for contemporary musical audiences and practitioners, rather than continuing to emphasise how significant the ‘new’ Internet’s impact on the industry’s processes of ‘production’, ‘consumption’ and ‘distribution’ is/was in comparison with pre-Internet musical milieux.

One standout document that has admittedly attempted to take a more pertinent approach than the academics listed above has been Simon Reynolds’ *Retromania* (2011), whose influence has subsequently loomed large over both academia and serious journalism. A full analysis of this monograph is presented in Section One, but it is worth noting here that *Retromania* has accrued a totemic status, not least through its theorisation (or, perhaps, speculation) of an alleged decline in musical innovation in the first decade of the 2000s. Other notable figures, such as the academic Mark Fisher (2014) and the journalist Paul Morley (October 2010; November 2010; March 2013; September 2014), have emphasised similar ideas, but it is Reynolds’ name that has become synonymous with the discourse. *Retromania* is built on the claim that contemporary musical styles and scenes fail to live up to or fulfil popular music’s (previous) levels of aesthetic innovation and instead re-invent or

revert to historical forms because of an (ostensibly) overbearing quantity of historical (and current) cultural material that is immediately accessible to web users. This argument is echoed in books such as Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* (2014). *Retromania* in this way has engendered a discourse that stresses the Internet's impact on popular musical output, while (usefully) avoiding the previously mentioned trend toward exaggerated academic excitement surrounding phenomena that are no longer 'new'. This focus on changes in the music itself rather than on shifts in the wider music industry sets *Retromania* apart from much of the work that has preceded it (and, indeed, has been published since). There is thus significant worth in Reynolds' work, not least in its refusal to adhere to the aforesaid trends in academic writing about online music cultures, and I consequently cite it throughout as a touchstone from which many of my own ideas have developed. However, it must be noted that there are significant problems with the text, and I disagree with many of the ideas put forward by Reynolds. Although the book's emphasis is intrinsically on the 'now', investigating aspects of the current digital landscape often overlooked by academics, its approach is implicitly tied to journalistic modes of criticism that emerged in the 1970s and prevailed until the 1990s.⁷ The lens of *Retromania* is thus refracted through the critical prism of themes and ideas pertaining (in particular) to innovation, genre, time/space specific scenes and journalistic/academic curation, which (I argue) carry less resonance in contemporary music culture than they did in earlier decades.⁸ As I suggest in Section One, the book is remarkably negative about online popular music despite its apparent attempts to engage with it, and criticises the role that the Internet has played in apparently slowing progression instead of offering a thorough study of the distinct and shifting phenomena that shape the contemporary musical milieu. Reynolds posits that there is too much information readily available online, resulting in music that supposedly inevitably is overly referential and, ultimately, regressive.

⁷ For accounts of this journalistic mode, see Jones, 1992; Jones, 2002; Shuker, 1994; Gorman, 2001; Toynbee, 1993; and Laing, 2006.

⁸ This point is explored fully in the first two chapters of this thesis.

However, as is argued here, he is unfortunately retaining a pre-Internet stance that is comparable to the academics referenced above. He fails to note, as is stressed throughout Chapter One, what is one of the original elements of this thesis: that contemporary audiences are accustomed to the wealth of cultural material available to them and, rather than being overwhelmed by it, instead are more than capable of negotiating the apparently saturated landscape to locate and create new and exciting music. This thesis has been conceived in the aftermath of, and in response to, much of the work that has been written in relation to the Internet and popular music,⁹ with the aim of offering a fresh – and, I argue, more insightful and appropriate – framework for understanding and analysing the role that digital experience plays in contemporary music cultures. The aim of this thesis is to address several key as-yet understudied issues: the continuing importance of authenticity in digital musical milieux, the impact of Post-Internet themes on both identity and musical production, and the ways in which musicians are producing work that addresses the role of the Internet as an artistic medium and, colloquially, as a way of life. These are all original approaches to academic analysis of contemporary musical milieux, marking this thesis as separate from the established frameworks previously used to analyse the Internet in popular music studies.

I begin here by briefly outlining the thesis, explaining my methodology, theoretical framework and the argument that I have developed. I differentiate my work from the analyses of digital culture referred to above by formulating an approach that draws on certain established theories from popular music studies alongside several key contemporary concepts from art and cultural studies. My thesis moves away from dominant retromanic claims that online music culture is essentially backward facing or overwhelmingly saturated as well as overwritten investigations into the web's impact on the music industry. Instead, I shed light on specific musicians whose work is indicative of a more general intrinsic and self-conscious

⁹ It most notably draws on *Retromania*, *Ghosts of My Life* and Morley's articles.

engagement with the Internet and whose output has been moulded by the fluid and interchangeable methods of distribution, production and promotion enabled by the web. The chapters address the visual, sonic and representational approaches of these musicians, highlighting specific artists from a number of distinct (but associated) genres. The process through which this sample of musicians was conceived is outlined below. My account of the musicians is focused on two central themes: one drawn from popular music studies, and one from more contemporary accounts of web culture. The latter is the notion of the ‘Post-Internet’, which is a concept that became prominent in theories of contemporary art from 2012 onwards.¹⁰ I explore the Post-Internet in the second section of the thesis, and it is the most crucial theme employed here. I utilise it throughout to refer to the self-consciously ‘digital’ musical production, promotional and representational techniques that define the musicians in this thesis, as well as when considering the experiences and identities of contemporary musical audiences. While there is much emerging research into post-millennial art online, the notion of the Post-Internet has yet to be fully analysed in academic work and has rarely been mentioned in relation to contemporary music at all. As such, I am taking a highly original approach to analysis of musical milieux in the 2010s. The concept of the Post-Internet was introduced partially as a response to claims that there was an Internet-generated dearth of originality in art and culture more widely, and in the thesis I deploy the term with specific reference to 2010s popular music due to its ability to truly illuminate the ways in which young contemporary audiences experience the Internet and musical milieux. Two of the concept’s key exponents, Karen Archey and Robin Peckham, have observed that Post-Internet art is

consciously created in a milieu that assumes the centrality of the network, and that often takes everything from the physical bits to the social ramifications of the Internet as fodder. From the changing nature of the image to the circulation of cultural objects,

¹⁰ See Archey and Peckham, October 2014; Vierkant, 2010; Wallace, 2014; Kholief, 2014; and Jurgenson, 2012; 2014.

from the politics of participation to new understandings of materiality, the interventions presented under this rubric attempt nothing short of the redefinition of art for the age of the Internet. This understanding of the Post-Internet refers not to a time ‘after’ the Internet, but rather to an Internet state of mind – to think in the fashion of the network (Archey and Peckham, October 2014, p. 8)

Effectively, the concept of the Post-Internet invokes a generation whose conscious lives have existed solely in the new millennium (sometimes referred to as ‘Generation Z’ [La Ferla, February 2015]) and who thus maintain an organic and ‘symbiotic’ relationship to the Internet that they have grown up alongside (Jurgenson, 2012). As alluded to earlier, these young people do not find the web revolutionary or difficult to navigate, as it has always been there as a commonplace aspect of their daily lives.

A central argument of Post-Internet theory is that a large part of these youths’ identities has been, and continues to be, shaped by and inter-connected with their interactions with digital spaces and technologies. As filmmaker Ryan Trecartin has noted, the constant presence of the Internet in the lives of the Post-Internet generation has disrupted the notion that one’s identity is now solely ‘locked to geograph[ic], or cultural, or ethnic, or gender[ed]’ contexts, as it is now similarly connected to digital spaces (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015). Theorist Nathan Jurgenson and musician Holly Herndon assert that these identity issues have been informed by the posthuman debates of the 1980s and 1990s,¹¹ which described a cyborgian relationship between people and technology (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014; Herndon, thesis interview, 2015). However, Post-Internet theory is separated from this earlier body of academic work because it takes ‘our intimate dependencies on these [digital] devices as a consensual starting point’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). The Internet and digital communication ‘devices are fundamental to our lives, we actually have little choice about our participation as they become increasingly tied to work, sociality and how others perceive us’ (ibid), which results in an interdependent and ‘symbiotic’ relationship that is entirely

¹¹ An issue discussed in full in Chapter Four.

inescapable and, indeed, often desirable (Jurgenson, 2012). Post-Internet culture's role in the (re)construction of identity is returned to consistently in each chapter of this thesis, as musicians analysed here are preoccupied with considering the Internet's impact on contemporary identity politics. If, as I argue in this thesis, a substantial amount of academic analysis of digital music culture has been overly focused on themes and phenomena pertaining to changes that occurred during the Internet's infancy (with specific reference to file-sharing's impact on the music industry as a whole), Post-Internet theory is contrastingly concerned with the fact that these phenomena have become increasingly internalised and normalised. The post-millennial 'Post-Internet' generation – as opposed to the earlier 'Internet' generation¹² – is not excited or overawed by the changing technology that surrounds them, as they have no experience of existence prior to the ubiquity of instantaneous pan-global communication and portable digital devices associated with the current (western) era. For the Post-Internet generation, mash-ups, emojis, smartphones, file-sharing, streaming, *YouTube*, social media, memes and touch-screens are a part of everyday life, and the music that they engage with is wholly integrated with these surrounding cultural and technological elements. It is true that the fact that 'the way we access and circulate information has changed profoundly' (as noted eloquently and extensively by the writers mentioned above) is deserving of the wealth of academic material dedicated to it (Cornell, 2013). However, 'our behaviours [and] even the way we think' – in other words, more intimate aspects of daily existence and, crucially, musical experiences – have also evolved in the time since but have not received nearly the same level of analysis to date (ibid). Those that have grown up with the web now act in a way that is symbiotic with its technological systems, and thus no longer deem the Internet's impact on music transformative but, colloquially, just a way of life (ibid). A great deal of contemporary art explores these themes, with the curatorial e-zine *DIS*

¹² See Section Two.

Magazine becoming a hub around which many Post-Internet artists congregate. The role of *DIS* is stressed throughout this thesis, with many of the musicians analysed expressing its thematic and aesthetic approach. The art that the magazine and its contributors produce seeks to embody and embrace the experiences of Post-Internet existence. As explained in Section Two, these aesthetics involve drawing on social media, online identity politics and information overload self-consciously. Crucially, the musicians outlined in this thesis also illuminate these themes in their work, and the notion of a Post-Internet musical aesthetic is the focus of this study. While I have thus far only offered a brief definition of a complex and significant concept, the term is considered in further depth in the second section and is elaborated throughout the remainder of the thesis.

The other key concept employed here, ‘authenticity’, is a term that has concerned leading popular music theorists such as Simon Frith (1996), Richard Middleton (1990) and Jason Toynbee (2000) since the field’s formative phase, and is, for Allan Moore, the most ‘loaded [...] value term employed in music discourse’ (Moore, 2002, p. 209). Put simply, the traditional definition of authenticity is that of a discursive or critical means through which a musician’s ideological or artistic worth can be measured, and is intrinsically linked to value judgments about integrity and honesty as well as notions such as identity and self-representation. It is a highly subjective and fraught issue, and the third section of this thesis fully outlines the concept of authenticity as foregrounded in previous popular music studies. The definition of the term that is most prominently accepted and utilised in this thesis is that of Richard Middleton. He argues that the most critical quality required for public perception of authenticity in a musician’s work and persona is their ability to symbolise (what is perceived to be) the ‘truth of’ both their own and their audience’s ‘cultural experience’ (Middleton, 1990, p. 127). To clarify, as Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson put it, ‘artists must speak the truth of their (and others’) situations [and] represent the culture from which’

they come to attain a reputation for authentic musical production with an audience that shares their cultural and contextual background (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, pp. 164–165). One of the original contributions proposed by this thesis is that many members of the Post-Internet generation – one that, as Cornell explains, has maintained a symbiotic relationship to the Internet due to the fact that ‘distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed, [meaning that people are] online all the time’ (Cornell, 2013)¹³ – arguably perceive an echo or representation of their own ‘cultural experience’ in musicians whose public personas and creative work are also informed by this Post-Internet context. This contrasts with much academic analysis of music on the Internet to date. While authenticity debates have dominated popular musical analysis and continue to be outlined in the contemporary journals referenced above,¹⁴ they have yet to be addressed in relation to Post-Internet culture. Discussions surrounding authenticity have indeed been largely discarded in discourse about the Internet specifically, with a reluctance to debate the fact that contemporary audiences may seek or locate authenticity in the web-specific music that they enjoy. This is partially informed by wide acceptance of the supposed prominence of retromania in contemporary culture. If authenticity is associated with notions of truth, innovation and self-expression (and a range of related concepts),¹⁵ then a culture that has been stereotypically defined by (inter alia) appropriation, pastiche and nostalgia might, from this perspective, be seen to be somewhat lacking in conventional modes of authenticity. This may explain why such a hitherto frequently analysed concept remains under-developed – or, to borrow from Born and Hesmondhalgh, ‘has been consigned to the intellectual dust-heap’ (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 30) – in relation to music on the Internet. Yet this belief that the notion of authenticity is incompatible with Internet musical production and consumption is flawed. The

¹³ See also Jurgenson, 2012; 2014.

¹⁴ See, for instance, recent articles including Nardi, Rietveld and Echard, 2014; McKinna, 2014; Ventzislavov, 2012; Montano, 2010; Katz, 2008; Fairchild, 2007; Meier, 2011; Eckstein, 2009; and Zagorski-Thomas, 2010.

¹⁵ This is returned to in greater depth in Section Three.

reason for this, as expressed in Section Three, is that authenticity is an ambiguous and ascribed (as opposed to fixed) concept that is dependent on its context and the tastes and experiences of the audience itself. Moore asserts that deciding whether a performance is authentic is dependent on who “‘we” are” (Moore, 2002, p. 210), indicating that it is wholly possible for audiences from any era to locate an authentic representation of their experiences in the work of a musician, even if their definition of authenticity does not resonate with those of previous generations. If Middleton is correct in his assertion that a reflection of the ‘truth of [a] cultural experience’ – both the artist’s and the audience’s – is the marker by which authenticity is measured, then it is arguable that any musician seen to engage with and draw on their surrounding context consistently and ‘sincerely’ can be said to be authentic, whether they are operating in an era defined by appropriation and referentiality or not.

I argue that authenticity remains absolutely critical to Post-Internet audiences and to Post-Internet musical production. Drawing on Middleton’s definition of authenticity and the ideas about Post-Internet identity referenced throughout this thesis, I suggest that authenticity for many members of the Post-Internet generation is located in the work of musicians whose entire output engages with the Internet self-consciously. While it would be easy to dismiss the approach of these artists as being a mere premeditated critical engagement with their digital surroundings, this thesis hypothesises that their effective embodiment of and intrinsic connection to the Internet is far more complex, intimate and personal than that argument would suggest. These musicians are all interested in the impact that the web has on their, and by extension their audiences’, identities and seek to wholly express these ‘cultural experiences’ of Post-Internet life in their music and self-representation. As Holly Herndon, one of the musicians most pertinent to this research, argues, making ‘best use of the interconnectivity we have available to us’ is the most discernibly ‘authentic’ method of musical production in the Post-Internet era (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). She believes

that the Internet is now such a symbiotic and intrinsic aspect of the lives of those that have grown up alongside it that a truly authentic reflection of contemporary ‘cultural experience’ must include a full engagement with its aesthetics and themes. Musicians such as TCF have indicated that their personal relationship with the web has directly informed their interest in creating music that depicts a sincere image of their experiences. He states that:

It was natural that [the Internet] would become a part of my practice. I started building web sites when I was thirteen or so and since then I learned how to make music via the web. [...] It’s becoming a central part in most people’s lives. [Post-Internet music is] a personal response to this world and a testing ground to explore the boundaries of technology (TCF, thesis interview, 2015)

Similarly, musician ADR asserts that ‘there is most definitely’ a continuing search for authenticity from ‘our generation’, believing that if an audience’s ‘entire adult life has been in the age of Internet overload’ they are more likely to locate authenticity in the output of musicians that provide a recognisable representation, or even ‘a critique, [...] a celebration and an extension’, of ‘the spirit of the Internet’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). An ‘authentic’ musician in the Post-Internet era does not retreat into nostalgia or seek to distance their work from the digital spaces that house it. Rather, they explore the online world in their sounds, images and self-representation: as ADR further posits, inauthentic ‘artistic content’ in the 2010s is that which is decidedly ‘not linked to a network [or] expanded into on-going streams’ (ibid), as opposed to ‘authentic’ Post-Internet musical output that is seemingly an audible product of the Post-Internet ‘experience’. Many members of the Post-Internet audience that has normalised and internalised contemporary digital cultural phenomena thus locate authenticity in relation to ‘cultural experience’ in the work of certain musicians that actively engage with their shared digital context. Regardless of how obviously constructed or premeditated this representation of the Post-Internet context may be (and audiences are

generally aware of the self-conscious nature of these musicians' techniques),¹⁶ these artists' strong interaction with their audiences and visible attempts to engage openly with the subcultural motifs and themes of online musical milieux (blogs, social networks, audiovisual technologies, avatars and many more illuminated in this thesis) garner them a reputation for authenticity with fans that experience similar phenomena on a daily basis.

This is not to suggest, of course, that *all* audiences growing up in the Post-Internet environment seek out music that is representative of their experiences. The continuing proliferation of genres and styles that are ostensibly uninformed by Post-Internet identities or aesthetics is arguably evidence of this, and there are infinitely more artists whose work does not engage with the Post-Internet condition than there are artists whose output does. As Frith has observed, 'the academic study of music has been limited by the assumption that the sounds must somehow "reflect" or "represent" the people' (Frith, 1996, p. 108), and I do not wish to suggest that all contemporary music has become a simple mirror of the Post-Internet age, nor to imply that every member of the Post-Internet generation is a fan of the artists analysed here. However, Post-Internet musical production, aesthetics and representational experiments are notable and rapidly growing trends that have informed the work of a range of increasingly visible musicians that have begun to exert an influence on mainstream musicians.¹⁷ The authentic reputation established by the musicians outlined here does merit discussion. While not every Post-Internet youth (the Post-Internet argument is that every person that has grown up with these technologies is a member of the Post-Internet generation) is necessarily concerned with seeking out Post-Internet musicians, those that do are able to find a specific set of aesthetic and thematic tropes that define the artists as identifiably (and in the terms outlined above, authentically) representing the truth of cultural 'Post-Internet'

¹⁶ This is an issue outlined in relation to academic analysis of authenticity in Section Three, as the 'constructedness' of a supposedly 'honest' persona is deemed problematic by academics such as Frith (1996) and Middleton (1990).

¹⁷ This is highlighted in the conclusion of this thesis.

experience. The increasing space dedicated to analyses of these artists in outlets such as *Pitchfork*, *Fact*, *The Quietus* and *The Fader*¹⁸ suggests a growing audience interest in this trend toward Post-Internet aesthetics and themes. These artists may not be seen by everyone that has grown up alongside the web to express their personal ‘truth of cultural experience’, and some may be critical of their self-conscious approach to Post-Internet techniques, but that does not negate the fact that they are self-consciously attempting to explore the notion of the Post-Internet in their work and that this is proving a popular and widely celebrated approach. Audiences that are interested in music that express the Post-Internet ‘experience’ can locate authentic representation in this music. This is therefore the key original approach of this thesis. I am suggesting that, given that the Post-Internet generation experiences a certain form of identity and way of life,¹⁹ any members of that generation that are seeking an authentic representation of these identity issues can find it in increasingly visible musicians whose entire output and public identity are shaped by their own Post-Internet experiences. This is not a form of ‘authenticity’ that is acknowledged or sought by every member of the Post-Internet generation; but then, given the mutable and context-specific nature of authenticity as a concept (as argued by Moore),²⁰ no form of popular music is or has ever been universally accepted as being intrinsically ‘authentic’. I argue that those that do seek music that is wholly connected to the virtual are able to locate it in the work of the musicians highlighted here, and that they consequently regard this music as true to the cultural experiences of the Post-Internet milieu. In response, the musicians investigated in this thesis deliberately amplify these Post-Internet themes further in order to strengthen their own reputation as authentic to the trends, themes and aesthetics of Post-Internet artistic production. It is important to note that Post-Internet music is not a genre term. These musicians may demonstrate comparable themes, but their styles are often widely divergent from one another, and many of them in

¹⁸ Articles from each of these, and more, are referenced throughout this thesis.

¹⁹ This is analysed in depth in Section Two.

²⁰ This is the major focus of Section Three.

fact aim to differentiate themselves from the sounds of others in this thesis.²¹ It is their indebtedness to Post-Internet ideas and digital spaces that connects them, not necessarily aesthetic similarity. The notion of an authentic musical attempt to represent the Post-Internet experience is unique to this thesis. I further elaborate on the definitions of and reasons for selecting the terms ‘Post-Internet’ and ‘authenticity’ throughout this thesis so that they may provide a more acute analysis of contemporary cultural experiences and musical milieux than those that have come before.

These concepts are deployed to make sense of the work of several key musicians whose output can be considered to be authentically ‘Post-Internet’. The selection was partly informed by a temporal frame in which some of the most significant examples of Post-Internet art have been produced. I thus focus on the first half-decade of the 2010s (2010-2014). This period marks what might be described as the post-*Retromania* period. Reynolds’ book was published in 2011, and was the result of research that had occurred across the previous five years or so. This was a period marked by debates about this topic on various forums and blogs²² and is an era in which many musicians operated within retromantic musical styles described by Reynolds including mash-ups and hauntology.²³ It could be argued that the first (roughly) fifteen years of the Internet (leading up to 2010) was a period when young consumers between the ages of, say, 18-25 could predominantly remember a time prior to the web’s emergence and did not share the same relationship with digital spaces that I argue the Post-Internet generation maintains (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). 2010 marks the beginning of the coming-of-age period for the Post-Internet generation, whose members have never known a life without digital technologies. Also, the influential (for the group of musicians I explore) *DIS Magazine* was founded in 2010. *DIS* is a focal point for Post-Internet art. It has provided a platform for the Post-Internet music that delineates the

²¹ See the interviews with Fatima Al Qadiri and Lotic completed for this thesis.

²² In fact, many of these debates were initiated on Reynolds’ own *Blissblog* as well as Mark Fisher’s *k-punk*.

²³ These themes are discussed throughout the blogs and books of these writers.

musicians analysed throughout this thesis. I have drawn a historical line at 2014 for two reasons.²⁴ First, because it would be dubiously prophetic to imply that the themes outlined here are likely to continue for years to come, and second because the early 2010s are a temporal hinterland: the ‘Post-Internet’ generation may share an organic relationship with the web,²⁵ but the Internet’s cultural dominance is still recent enough that they feel the need to engage and experiment with it self-consciously.²⁶ My work focuses on musicians that have self-consciously operated as part of the Post-Internet ‘era’ and ‘generation’: artists whose sounds, visual media and identity politics seem to invoke, echo and embrace the digital spaces that surround them.

The quantity of musicians that have operated online is clearly vast and diverse, and attempts to suggest that some are more ‘worthy’ of analysis than others would of course be deemed problematic or exclusive. However, the key motif that links each of the artists selected here is their deliberate and self-conscious engagement with (and even embodiment of) the Post-Internet condition. The musicians who have expressed these themes and aesthetics have operated in a style that indicates a clear acknowledgement, as well as celebration and/or critique, of the increasing omnipresence of digital technology and online communication, and they have done so with the understanding that their audiences are experiencing these same phenomena as part of their everyday lives. They are not merely utilising digital channels as a promotional tool, or taking on similar web-era distribution methods to musicians studied in previously mentioned earlier academic overviews of online music. Although they may partake in now-common practices such as uploading their albums for free or streaming them on websites in advance of their release, this is of less interest to my research than musicians whose entire public persona, sonic identity, visual imagery and

²⁴ However, I do draw on a handful of noteworthy musical examples from early 2015.

²⁵ This is explored in Section Two.

²⁶ These issues are returned to at the conclusion of this thesis.

use of social networking are designed to address the Post-Internet condition. These are musicians who have, in the words of Aitken, given their online audience

a new way to engage – and [highlight] the need for a new playfulness and spirit of adventure in the music industry’s relationship with the Internet. Why not explore the creative possibilities offered by the Internet? Why not use it as a medium to shock, delight and surprise? Yes there are real problems created by the new digital paradigms. [...] But there are also opportunities [signalled by those artists that are] playing with the medium and [their online] audience (Aitken, January 2015)

Interviews conducted for this thesis with several of these ‘playful’ musicians demonstrate that they are, through their work and personas, ‘responding to the fact the Internet exists’ (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015), and that their creative output is ‘a direct result of sitting in front of a computer ever since [they were] allowed to’ (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014). Although I do not take everything that these musicians say at face value,²⁷ their assertions indicate that their music wilfully explores their experiences as members of the Post-Internet generation. This is a theme that recurs throughout this thesis, and it is this issue that I suggest leads certain members of the Post-Internet audience to discern an apparent ‘authenticity’ (through an echo of their own cultural experiences) throughout their output. Most of the musicians analysed are closely aligned to *DIS Magazine*, whose work is centrally concerned with documenting and celebrating the Post-Internet condition outlined in Section Two. All of the musicians operated during the chosen five-year time period outlined above, and they each inhabit the distinct genres of dance, hip-hop, R&B and noise (often drawing on all four at once). These genres are significantly increasingly interconnected²⁸ due to their prominently electronic nature.²⁹ Given the inseparable relationship between audio and the visual that has only increased in a culture saturated with the digital,³⁰ with music existing in close tandem with the screens, applications and programs that house it, it could be argued that these artists

²⁷ This becomes apparent during the explanation of the Post-Internet in Section Two.

²⁸ This is shown most prominently in Section Nine.

²⁹ See, for instance, the use of electronic beats in dance music, the employment of static and industrial sounds in noise, the popularity of the sampler in hip-hop, and the importance of studio production techniques in R&B.

³⁰ This is another theme that is revisited repeatedly throughout this thesis.

are not merely musicians, but are instead operating within spaces that previously would have been dedicated to multimedia artists. Sound, image and identity are rapidly becoming interdependent – the Internet enables a genuinely interactive audiovisual experience³¹ – and thus Post-Internet music is not just a sonic phenomenon. As Holly Herndon notes, ‘the best [contemporary musicians] are active everywhere. [They are] looking at other fields [and] are too smart and curious to limit their practice solely to music [due to the fact that “music” and “image” are] arbitrary fields that honestly don’t mean too much anymore’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). The musicians’ videos, social media and self-promotion are all now just as important as their sounds; in Post-Internet music, the sonic document is rarely consumed in isolation from these other phenomena. It must be noted that there is an undoubtedly and self-consciously positive style that marks my analyses of these Post-Internet musicians. In other words, I have taken a celebratory view of these artists’ works as a counter-position to the negativity and pessimism that has informed the retromanic accounts of Simon Reynolds, Mark Fisher and others. The innovative nature of the musicians’ output is emphasised to illuminate what I see as the continuing interest in progression, experimentation and (most crucially) representation of cultural experience in contemporary popular music cultures. The artists selected include 18+, Arca, FKA twigs, Ryan Trecartin, Lotic, Venus X, Future Brown, PC Music, SOPHIE, P. Morris, Death Grips, Nguzunguzu, Jam City, Mykki Blanco, Holly Herndon, Gatekeeper, Visionist, Gobby, James Ferraro, Hood By Air, Lil B, Hype Williams and others.³² These are not commercially successful artists,³³ but their work has merited regular hypotheses in key contemporary music and culture periodicals such as *Dazed*, *The Wire*, *Fact* and *Pitchfork*. It is worth noting that many, including Arca, Death Grips,

³¹ This is explored most prominently in Section Ten.

³² I have elected to refer to these artists by their chosen stage names, for the most part, due to the fact that this is not a biographical or personal study of them as individuals, but rather an analysis of their creative work across a range of media. Also, I do not wish to ignore their decision to utilise pseudonyms and alternative public personas, particularly given the importance of concepts such as representation, authenticity, identity politics, anonymity and transparency in this thesis.

³³ One exception, perhaps, is 2014 Mercury Award-nominated singer and producer FKA twigs.

Hood By Air and SOPHIE, have established ties with far more financially successful artists such as Kanye West and Björk. This is an issue that is explored in the conclusion of this thesis, as it evinces the ways in which Post-Internet art is being gradually incorporated into mainstream consciousness as commercially successful musicians increasingly look to become authenticated by drawing on the styles and sounds of these musicians.ⁱⁱ

I offer a distinct and original argument by addressing highly contemporary aspects of the musical milieu (such as digital music making in the 2010s, retromanic discourses and online audiences), whilst focusing on musicians operating within an aesthetic/thematic style that has been hitherto unexplored in academic work. Post-Internet art is rarely discussed outside of art circles (and has been largely overlooked in academic studies to date), so the notion of Post-Internet music is effectively a novel concept that this thesis develops. My methodology involves combining various forms of analysis and investigation. As I have explained, my conceptual frame is partially in critique and refinement of previous scholarly work on the Internet and popular music. Reynolds' *Retromania*, a key text in this body of work, is explored and critiqued in this thesis: I challenge many aspects of this work, whilst endorsing and augmenting other elements. A lengthy and detailed account of the key theories of 'authenticity' and the 'Post-Internet' offers an acute language and theoretical framework for analyses of music in the digital era. I draw on a large body of scholarly work, appropriating academic concepts such as posthumanism, queer theory, subcultural capital, information overload, social networking and narcissism, vocal science, representation politics, as well (as mentioned above) as authenticity, retromania and the Post-Internet, in the process yielding a multi-disciplinary approach. In order to critically make sense of the music and spaces that I analyse, I have also drawn on a large number of journalistic sources.³⁴ These are not necessarily utilised in the same way as more 'scholarly' texts and references.

³⁴ The referenced articles are predominantly 'serious' think-pieces from magazines and websites such as *Pitchfork*, *Fact*, *The Quietus*, *The Wire*, *The Fader* and *i-D*.

Instead, they are used as ethnographic sources, illuminating how (increasingly quasi-academic) blogs and e-zines seek to narrativise and contextualise the musicians and culture that surrounds them. Artists including Arca, FKA twigs, Death Grips and Lil B are analysed at length in *Pitchfork*, *Fact*, *Dazed* and *The Fader*, and a comprehensive analysis of this field of music would be limited by a downplaying of the importance that these magazines and their think-pieces have played in the development of the Post-Internet aesthetic. Ignoring their prominence would suggest, on one level, that a top-down approach to analysing Post-Internet music is preferred to a bottom-up one. This would contradict the arguments that are made most prominently in Section Four regarding fan power and the importance of social networking and blogging culture to the development of the contemporary music milieu. Moreover, these sources are necessarily drawn on simply because of the novel and original nature of this research. These artists have yet to be written about in an academic forum, and this is thus the first in-depth account of the Post-Internet trend in contemporary popular music. In the absence of academic analyses of these musicians to draw on and critique, it is crucial to illuminate what journalists and fans have said about these artists, as well as drawing on the many interviews with musicians posted on these blogs. I seek to take these (sometimes rather simplistic) ideas and, with the benefit of additional academic sources and concepts, augment and refine them in the development of a more critical and reflective argument.

The theories, concepts and referenced sources are applied to the many artists listed above through textual analysis of experiments in music, visual output, interactivity, social networking and, crucially, identity politics and representation. In order to augment this conceptual approach, I conducted specific forms of ethnographic investigation during my research. The most important of these, and the one that stands out most prominently in this

thesis, has been the production of interviews with fifteen key artists and academics.³⁵ I asked a number of standard questions to each interviewee, exploring their views on the impact that the Internet has had on their work generally, as well as the importance of concepts such as authenticity, scenes, genres and the Post-Internet to their work, and their interests in or associations with *DIS Magazine*.³⁶ These more general answers are employed throughout the thesis. I also asked more specific questions about their creative work and then developed and engaged with these ideas in my account of their personas³⁷ and music. Occasionally, musicians sought to challenge my theoretical approach,³⁸ and these differences of perspective are noted if not always fully endorsed in this thesis. The more specific answers given by these artists are utilised most prominently in the sections of the thesis that deal with their work in particular.³⁹ In addition to the interviews, I attended a number of musical events and artistic exhibitions that have been remarkably useful in my analysis.⁴⁰ Many of these are referred to in this thesis,⁴¹ while those that are not mentioned directly have informed my writing and analysis nonetheless. I have also been very active on social networks and streaming sites such

³⁵ Interviewees included current *DIS Magazine* music editor Finn Diesel; musical duo 18+; video artist Ryan Trecartin; producer (and FKA twigs/Björk/Kanye West collaborator) Arca; producer SOPHIE; producer (and Kanye West collaborator) Evian Christ; composer, multimedia artist and vocalist Holly Herndon; DJ Lotic; musician Jam City; producer, *DIS* columnist and Future Brown co-founder Fatima Al Qadiri; academic and music blogger Adam Harper; video artist Jesse Kanda; producer, *DIS* collaborator (and driving force behind #HDBOYZ and Gatekeeper) Aaron David Ross; producer Gobby; and sonic collagist and digital artist TCF.

³⁶ These interviews were conducted in a variety of different ways, depending on what suited each figure, resulting in face-to-face conversations (e.g. 18+), video calls using *Skype* (e.g. Arca, Ryan Trecartin, Lotic, Fatima Al Qadiri), informal email discussions (e.g. Jesse Kanda, TCF, Adam Harper) and, most commonly, emailed questions and responses. Each of these approaches yielded differing, but equally valid and useful, responses and response-styles.

³⁷ Again, as mentioned above, I have elected primarily to utilise the interviewees' pseudonyms, rather than their 'real' names.

³⁸ One notable example of this is Fatima Al Qadiri.

³⁹ The full interview transcripts are included within the accompanying blog (the link to which is located before the appendices), as the sheer quantity of insightful information that was yielded by the conversations (much of which could not be fitted into this thesis) is worthy of further inspection.

⁴⁰ These include *Arca live with Jesse Kanda* (Paris: 1/12/14); *Total Freedom's Burning Head Collage* (London: 17/10/14); *Polymorphism x Janus* (Berlin: 10/10/14); *Future Brown* (London: 19/2/15); *18+* (London: 28/2/15); *Late at Tate Britain: Rinse* (London: 5/12/14); *FKA twigs* (London: 8/10/14); *Evian Christ Trance Party* (London: 22/11/13); *Lizzie Fitch/Ryan Trecartin: Priority Innfield 2013* (London, 2/10/14-21/12/14); *Vapor City: Live* (London: 8/11/13); *Dollop Presents Kelela – Live* (London: 13/11/13); *Death Grips* (London: 7/11/12); and *Hype Williams* (London: 24/11/12).

⁴¹ The thesis also references several performances that I could not attend but have acquired footage and/or first-hand accounts of from others.

as *Twitter* and *YouTube*, maintaining a constant and up-to-date focus on the online activities of the artists analysed here while retaining a full knowledge of current trends in musical promotion, production, and distribution. In an era that both Reynolds and Fisher argue is heavily informed by excess (Reynolds, 2011, p. 55; Fisher, 2014, loc. 2572),⁴² remaining abreast of the activities of these musicians and the developments surrounding the Post-Internet musical milieu was a difficult and time-consuming task. However, it is one that has directly informed my conclusions. Finally, a large amount of images are included throughout the thesis. Given the important role that performance and the audiovisual hold in this thesis, it was crucial to include visual examples to augment my textual analysis throughout.⁴³ To summarise, then, sources that have been used during my research and that are applied throughout this thesis include academic texts (journal articles and books) from a wide variety of disciplines; journalistic monographs such as *Retromania* and *Ghosts of My Life*; e-zines, newspapers and print magazines that are crucial to the Post-Internet musical milieu;⁴⁴ quasi-academic blogs and think-pieces from key figures such as Reynolds, Harper and Fisher; albums, mixtapes, radio shows and musical downloads released during the five year period; videos, social networks, ‘games’ and performances from this same period; multiple images from a variety of different sources; and a series of personal interviews with the musicians themselves.

The thesis is comprised of five chapters, each of which contains two sections, plus a conclusion (which effectively acts as the eleventh ‘section’ of the thesis). The first four sections introduce conceptual and contextual ideas that are drawn on throughout the remaining six sections, each of which includes textual analysis of the musicians themselves.

⁴² See Chapter One.

⁴³ In order to aid this further, I have constructed a private blog that contains links to many of the videos, social media accounts, websites and *SoundCloud* pages referenced throughout. This appendix augments the analysis of the thesis by providing sonic, visual and representational examples. The link to and access information for this digital appendix are included alongside the references.

⁴⁴ These include *Fact*, *Dummy*, *The Wire*, *The Guardian*, *Pitchfork*, *i-D*, *Dazed*, *The Quietus* and *The Fader*.

The first chapter focuses on accounts of popular music online, exploring two key themes that have been referenced already in this introduction: retromania and the Post-Internet. The first section analyses Reynolds' seminal text in full, stressing its importance while highlighting significant problems with its conceptual frame. It also draws on the writing of Fisher and Morley, both of whose writing augments and amplifies Reynolds' arguments. Although I draw on several useful elements of these texts throughout, in general there are a significant number of issues with their arguments that require elaboration prior to any subsequent analysis of online music culture. Reynolds' text in particular is such a critical presence in this field that it would be remiss to ignore its ideas here, and reviews of the book from both academic journals and media outlets are referenced throughout this section. I explore retromanic ideas at the very beginning of this thesis due to their dominance and, indeed, their importance for providing a (somewhat limited, but still useful) critical overview of digital music cultures. In the second section I outline the notion of the Post-Internet as a more useful methodology for reviewing contemporary culture and popular music more specifically. I define the Post-Internet era as coming after the 'retromanic' era (pre-2010) that Reynolds outlines, suggesting that fan-bases and audiences are increasingly developing an interdependent relationship with digital environments and are thus losing interest in the retrospective nostalgia that, according to Reynolds, provides a respite from the oversaturated virtual spaces of the present. In this section I introduce concepts including information noise and the virtual plaza, which are products of Post-Internet culture, while emphasising the crucial role that *DIS Magazine* plays in the creation of art that self-consciously explores these themes. The second chapter is about authenticity, and explores the concept in two different sections. The first of these analyses the term in full, offering an overview of academic accounts of the subject from the early period of popular music studies through to the present. I conclude that Middleton and Moore's definitions of authenticity remain critical aspects of

contemporary music cultures due to the current trend for music that (at least seems to) directly represent the ‘truth’ of (in this case) the Post-Internet ‘cultural experience’. This argument is augmented through the analysis that follows in later chapters. The second section of this chapter applies this theory to practice, showing how the Post-Internet musical milieu is fan-led and configurable. I focus on blogging, journalism, file-sharing and interactivity online, revealing the ways in which popular musical milieux have changed in the Post-Internet era. This section illuminates how, rather than continuing to reform the music industry into the 2010s as has been argued previously, these changes have in fact become everyday elements of a fluid system of musical production, consumption and discourse for contemporary audiences. This assimilation of digital technology into the everyday lives of the Post-Internet generation is an aspect of Post-Internet music culture that the artists investigated in later chapters have fully embodied, I argue, in order to authentically represent the experiences of the Post-Internet musical milieu.

The latter three chapters turn attention to the musicians themselves, applying the concepts and contextual issues raised in the first two chapters to specific examples of Post-Internet music in practice. Chapter Three focuses on irony and critique, reflecting on a strand of contemporary music making that has been informed by *DIS*’ interests in often humorous and hypercritical ironic forms of artistic production. There is a measure of ‘insincerity’ in the work of the artists focused on here, given the exaggerated and often ‘tongue-in-cheek’ approach of their art and representational politics. However, that does not negate their critique of many of the themes outlined in definitions of the Post-Internet, nor does it limit the authenticity located in their portrayal of post-millennial life. The first section of this chapter is centred on PC Music and vaporwave, which have drawn much criticism from

supposedly more ‘sincere’ musicians.⁴⁵ I simultaneously problematise and defend the approaches of these artists from the outset, acknowledging that their reputation does much to limit the power of more conventionally ‘sincere’ artists discussed in later chapters, but also noting that there is authenticity located in their self-conscious style and critique of the virtual plaza. The latter half of the chapter analyses self-reflexive approaches to representational politics in the social networking of Lil B, James Ferraro and Hype Williams. These artists are all somewhat parodic and exaggerated in their approach, but they also engage self-consciously with concepts such as anonymity, narcissism and total transparency that are key elements of identity in Post-Internet culture. Chapter Four moves away from this ironic and distanced method of exploring the Post-Internet condition into more nuanced and supposedly ‘sincere’ embodiments of the present context. The critical fields of queer theory and posthumanism are drawn on in Section Seven, the first half of this chapter, in order to develop the notion of ‘digital queer’ in Post-Internet identity politics. This is evidenced through analyses of Ryan Trecartin, Mykki Blanco, Kelela and Arca, who combine the complexity of digital identity with the androgynous flow of queer gender politics. This interpretation of their work was upheld in interviews conducted for this thesis with Trecartin and Arca in particular. Section Eight takes the embodiment of Post-Internet themes further, analysing artists whose oeuvre contemplates the impact of Post-Internet information noise⁴⁶ on identity politics. Academic accounts of vocal science are cited here, as it is argued that vocals have provided a tool for musicians such as Holly Herndon, Visionist and Laurel Halo to investigate the virtual world’s impact on notions of humanity. The voice is the most ‘human’ instrument,⁴⁷ and it is telling that these musicians explore the potential to dehumanise vocals specifically through the use of digital effects. Death Grips, 18+ and FKA

⁴⁵ This opinion was stressed in interviews conducted for this thesis with Fatima Al Qadiri (2014), Lotic (2014) and Jam City (2015) in particular.

⁴⁶ See Section Two.

⁴⁷ This is according to academics such as Dickinson (2001); Auner (2003); Loza (2001); and Harper (July 2014).

twigs, who consider contemporary identity through the use of avatars, digi-animation, ‘symbiotic’ posthuman themes and virtual sexuality, are also analysed here.ⁱⁱⁱ

The final chapter is split into two differing sections that share a similar theme: pan-global channels of influence and interactivity.⁴⁸ Section Nine stresses the ways in which these concepts have been drawn on musically, focusing primarily on the genre-collapsing label Fade To Mind, the collage-esque DJing style that defines digital queer parties such as *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus*, and the trash-art of Gobby. Each is preoccupied with exhibiting multiple disparate strands of influence, creating impenetrable and experimental walls of sensory overload that recall the vast quantities of information available to Post-Internet audiences. Section Ten, in contrast, analyses how these overwhelming channels of influence relate to audience interactivity and the need for visual stimulation.⁴⁹ I begin by outlining the importance that screens play in contemporary culture, explaining that sound has to some extent become subservient to the image online due to the comparative immediacy of visual stimuli. This has inspired the audiovisual ‘games’ of musicians such as P. Morris, Death Grips and Gatekeeper and the websites of artists that exhibit their music in Post-Internet audiovisual environments. These spaces and ‘games’ are effectively immersive musical formats designed to retain the interest of, as Reynolds describes in Section One, the ‘attention-deficit disorder’ generation of the twenty-first century (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 71-73). The conclusion to this thesis draws these ideas together while simultaneously examining their increasing prominence in more mainstream examples of popular music. Commercially successful artists such as Kanye West, Beyoncé, Björk and Aphex Twin have started to appropriate from and collaborate with the musicians, themes and aesthetics described throughout this thesis, suggesting that they too are seeking new methods of rendering their

⁴⁸ This is effectively, as is argued in Section Two, a direct result of information noise.

⁴⁹ The Section draws on ideas about fan culture outlined in Section Four.

work attractive to and representative of the experiences of Post-Internet audiences.⁵⁰ I also expose unsuccessful attempts by mainstream artists (such as Rihanna's problematic appropriation of the Post-Internet styles of #seapunk and *GHE20G0TH1K*) to forge these same connections that have resulted in audiences rejecting their attempts to construct authentically Post-Internet music. Through analysis of these musicians and a study of the audience response to their work, this thesis argues that gaining an authentic reputation for representing the truth of Post-Internet cultural experience is something that is often sought but is not necessarily easily attainable, particularly for those operating within the mainstream music industry. This is another aspect of the authenticity debate in contemporary music that has yet to be addressed in academic work, and this thesis aims to correct the constricted nature of much writing on online music cultures to date.

⁵⁰ Furthermore, artists such as FKA twigs have gradually become assimilated into more mainstream networks such as television appearances, tabloid newspaper articles and corporate advertising campaigns.

CHAPTER ONE: *Theorising digital cultures*

Chapter 1 – Section 1: Retromania: a critique

The 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel (Reynolds, 2011, p. x)

There is a widely held view among cultural commentators such as Simon Reynolds (2011), Mark Fisher (2014), Stephen Brown (2001) and Paul Morley (October 2010; November 2010; March 2013; September 2014) that the technological possibilities offered by online media have generated a temporal and spatial restructure. This has been brought about primarily by the pervasive archive of past material that is located on file-sharing networks, blogs and video playback websites such as *YouTube*. These writers argue that culture (and particularly popular music) has become saturated with nostalgia, retrospective referentiality and an omnivorous desire to consume all accessible resources. Reynolds' *Retromania* (2011) and Fisher's writing (including his blog *k-punk* and 2014 book *Ghosts of my Life*) have become canonical texts for those writers and academics that, in the words of Harper, 'claim that the production of music with a radical identity and some degree of sufficient novelty has slowed, usually in favour of a revision of musics of the past' (Harper, June 2012), and these theories have been furthered by journalists such as Paul Morley. These critics assert that a forward thinking approach to artistic production dissipated significantly once cultural resources became as readily and unprecedentedly available as they are online. It is imperative, therefore, in developing a thesis on authenticity and music in the post-millennial era, to first analyse the various facets of this pervasive line of argument. The first section of this chapter offers an overview of this widely accepted (but, I would suggest, problematically disparaging) framework for analysing digital music culture (and, indeed, online culture more generally). While the work of Fisher, Morley and others has been key within this field of thought, it is undoubtedly *Retromania* that has become the most crucial and widely cited on the subject. Its influence ranges from academic study on contemporary popular music to

magazines such as *Pitchfork*, *Dazed* and *Fact*, whose post-2011 articles and reviews make frequent reference to the seemingly unchallenged ideas that Reynolds puts forward.⁵¹ iv I focus strongly on Reynolds' monograph (and associated articles), as much post-*Retromania* debate has simply reaffirmed the ideas foregrounded in the book. I also reference the ideas of Fisher and Morley, while reviews of Reynolds' text are drawn on throughout. I suggest that the issue that constricts these critics' conceptions is their continuing promotion of a late-twentieth century academic and journalistic preoccupation with scenes, curatorial journalism, subcultural 'events' and linear evolution,⁵² concepts that I argue are incompatible with a post-millennial musical milieu that, as is demonstrated throughout this thesis, implicitly eschews such elements through a structure of instantaneous transnational communication. Indeed, these communicative forms are highlighted throughout *Retromania*, but with a far more negative outlook than that employed in this thesis. I question the usefulness of foregrounding a discourse drawn from pre-digital theory to address the workings of a complex musical milieu that, these critics themselves agree, fundamentally redefines concepts of time, space and progression through its mass archival systems and pan-global channels of influence.⁵³ This section outlines the limitations of the retromanic conversation, emphasising ways in which it fails to capture or discern the complexities of online music cultures. These elements become clearer as the thesis progresses, particularly as I introduce Post-Internet ideas in the next section.

As stated, Reynolds and fellow commentators argue that there has been a temporal and spatial dissolution generated by the Internet's vast archival systems of blogs, file-sharing and *YouTube*.⁵⁴ These writers suggest that this has resulted in an overly referential and

⁵¹ For just a few examples, see LaBonte, 2012; *Noisey*, 2014; Finlayson, June 2014; Diduck, 2012; Finlayson, September 2012; and Richardson, 2011.

⁵² See Jones, 1992; Jones, 2002; Shuker, 1994; Gorman, 2001; Toynbee, 1993; and Laing, 2006.

⁵³ These themes and developments are highlighted briefly in this section, but are the primary focus of Section Four in particular.

⁵⁴ This is focused on in Section Four.

backward facing music culture, which has led journalists such as Morley to make damning judgments about a perceived lack of worth in the contemporary musical milieu.⁵⁵ ‘Nostalgia’ and ‘revival’ are terms that have become increasingly commonplace in popular culture and a pastiche of past sounds and imagery can be noted throughout early twenty-first century music (Reynolds, 2011, p. xvii; Morley, October 2010). Perhaps the most dominant instance of retrospective musicality is found in the recent trend toward (most prominently female) singers whose style is reminiscent of late-twentieth century genres. The ‘eighties synth-pop’ of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry, the ‘vintage-soul’ of Adele and Amy Winehouse, and a multitude of quasi-folk singer-songwriters (Reynolds, 2011, p. xvii) are in frequent radio, television and streaming site circulation, with Lady Gaga arguably being the most high profile pop star of the late-2000s. Reynolds also emphasises the dominance of a nostalgic garage rock aesthetic defining the work of leading 2000s rock groups such as The White Stripes and The Hives, as well as the continuing recycling of the aesthetics of 1990s club styles (ibid). These critics use this as evidence to argue that the majority of visible musical styles in the early twenty-first century have been revivalist. As Morley asserts, the post-millennial ‘punchline to rock history involves endless, gradually degrading reminiscing, an encircling series of recurrences, keepsakes and reunions’ (Morley, October 2010). Reynolds argues that ‘nearly all the developments [of the 2000s] were either tweaks to established genres [or] archive-raiding styles’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 406). This embracing of bygone scenes and sounds supposedly manifests as pastiche-based nostalgia, rather than a critical appropriation of past formats, as ‘they are to [the original musicians and scenes] what a plastic flower is to a real one’ (Morley, October 2010).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See, for example, Morley’s assertion that ‘these days [...] you can find plenty of examples of something that historians will one day describe as the key moment when rock, or pop [...] came to an end’ (Morley, November 2010). This is a mindset that typifies that of most retromanic critics.

⁵⁶ This trend has provided stable financial income for the contemporary music industry, as young web-based consumers can easily locate archived musical styles online and subsequently revel in the ability to partake in their revival.

Reynolds believes that the lack of new sounds is due to an oversaturated contemporary landscape caused by the Internet's role as an infinite archive of global and historical cultural material, as 'most of the styles of music and subcultures that have ever existed are still with us' (Reynolds, 2011, p. 406). There is a 'crisis of over-documentation triggered by digital technology. [...] What this means is that the presence of the past in our lives has increased immeasurably and insidiously' (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 55-56). Web users can, with relative ease, access practically any form of music that has ever been created. The diversity of content is said to result in a generation with little understanding of temporal linearity or historical significance. With so much music detached from its original context, consumers that have grown up in the digital era are assumed to be incapable of fully differentiating between music from the past and present. In this context, Reynolds explains that

If you're under the age of 25 and have grown up with a relationship to music based around total access and the erosion of a sense of sounds belonging to a historical sequence, thinking about music in terms of a development through time becomes alien and unrecoverable (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 33)

These writers also assert that it is not just temporal context that is affected; spatiality becomes distorted too. Reflecting on this point, Reynolds notes that 'the integrity of "here" is being fractured just as much as the integrity of "now"', causing an impenetrable wealth of pan-global influence (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 71-73). Furthermore, he argues that 'attention-deficit disorder [is] caused by the environment, in this case the datascape. Our attention is dispersed, tantalised, teased' (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 71-73). The 'attention-deficit disorder' of web-surfers, instigated by a digital realm that 'supplies them with purpose-built, easily accessed pleasure and escape' (Morley, March 2013), is allegedly caused by over-exposure to data and cultural material from both the entirety of the past and from everywhere in the world.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁷ This is emphasised in further depth in the second section, as it results in wider academic discussions about the impact of information overload on web users.

current generation has ‘immediate access to abundant pop culture, to a near infinity of packaged sensation’ (ibid), meaning that they are able to locate unprecedented quantities of recorded sounds, music videos and live performances through their Internet browsers. Reynolds argues throughout *Retromania* that this creates problems with taste cultures and immersion in music itself, as listeners are prompted to make a decision between quantity and quality. These critics assert that the Internet fetishises a ‘culture-of-plenty’, given the archival systems of *YouTube*, blogs and file-sharing networks, meaning that quantity frequently becomes the more popular option (Reynolds, December 2009). As these writers suggest, it is because of the temporal dissolution effected by the web that consumers’ MP3 players frequently contain more music than can ever be listened to in one lifetime. Collecting and owning as much music as possible has allegedly become one of the trends of this ease-of-access culture, in contrast to past tendencies toward the full absorption of a single album or piece of music.⁵⁸ The other significant issue for these commentators is that the Internet’s flattening out of time and space has resulted in the resurgence of music that previous generations discarded due to its lack of cultural worth. In other words, the Internet’s archival structure creates a ready-made refuse pile for the cultural debris that would once have been deemed inessential or, simply, ‘trash’. The Internet provides an even platform for material that once would have been separated by binaries of taste (generally inspired by curatorial music critics’⁵⁹ distinctions of ‘good’/‘bad’ music). As such, celebrated musical performances and international political debates share identical space on *YouTube* with commercials and smartphone videos, with the only clips to be afforded greater ‘exposure’ being promoted by corporate sponsorship.⁶⁰ The issue that Reynolds and others locate is that future musicians and consumers will struggle to differentiate between what his generation

⁵⁸ See Nuttall et al, 2011; Longhurst, 1995; Magaudda, 2011; and Jones, March 2002.

⁵⁹ This is explored in greater depth in Section Four.

⁶⁰ Virtual corporate dominance is an emerging theme that is explored throughout this thesis, particularly in Section Two and Section Five.

deemed ‘worthwhile’ or ‘worthless’. These critics display a distinct yearning for a time ‘when the past stayed where it was and wasn’t as easy to access as it is now’ (Morley, September 2014).

Ultimately, it is the changes outlined above that have resulted in the apparent dearth of originality of which Reynolds is so critical. As he asks repeatedly, ‘where are the major new genres and subcultures of the twenty-first century?’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. v). This outlook is informed by the mythologizing meta-history of rock and popular music. By this I mean the sequential canonisation of artists, subcultures and genres from the assumed birth of popular music in the 1950s to the present day, locating each influential star and style within a progressive linear narrative. Innovation (in this system) is intrinsically linked to time/space-specific scenes that form independently of globalised musical dispersion. As such, the exclusive, localised nature of these scenes’ growth limits the dilutive impact that outsider influences can have on them, instead allowing musical genres to develop naturally and fully in isolation. Progression has long been defined, Reynolds notes, by ‘the arrival of new [context-specific] sounds and subcultures of the kind that are accepted as a New Thing even by people who detest the music’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 406).⁶¹ In losing the exclusivity that existed before the connectivity of the Internet, isolated subcultures allegedly cannot materialise without the impact of sounds and scenes from elsewhere; as such, the post-millennial ‘New Thing’ is rarely new, but is instead a bricolage (or ‘a dazzling cultural hybrid’ [Morley, March 2013]) of transnational/trans-temporal influences. Reynolds’ writing on the ‘hardcore continuum’ is a useful template for this notion of scene-based innovation. This term defines the ‘forward-looking, fast-turnover world of [1990s] UK club and rave culture’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 233). It is the era that he equates most strongly with musical

⁶¹ Indeed, according to Timothy Gabriele, retromanic critics promote the theory that twentieth century popular ‘music’s progression [was] fuelled by an interplay of black and white music, with blacks producing cutting-edge sound and whites generating fresh ideas by trying to recreate those sounds and “getting it wrong”’ (Gabriele, 2011).

progression, arguing that ‘ravers were dancing to music that was literally from the future’, with novelty consistently fuelled by a ‘sense of runaway momentum’ (ibid). He explains that this was intrinsically connected to being a part of specific club scenes at particular times/places. Yet when he considers the role of dance music in contemporary digital culture, he suggests that it has ‘succumb[ed] to retrospection’, an issue that he deems to be ‘a contradiction of everything [it] was about’ (ibid). The expectation in Reynolds’ conceptualisation of innovation, symbolised in his lamentation for rave’s future-impulse, is that progress is linear and forward leaning. During the late-twentieth century, the narrative provided by music magazines and major labels was one of constant upheaval and chronological lines of influence. As Luttmann and Doll argue, reading these texts ‘could easily [create] the impression that all before-punk music was leading up to punk, and that all after-punk music was a response to it (or at least a departure from it)’ (Luttmann and Doll, 2012). The problem with this structure, as explored in the next section, is that it is effectively incompatible with the era of the Internet and its communicative and archival systems. The web profoundly undermines ideals of linear progression due to its inherent deconstruction of previous notions of time and space. This has subsequently been depicted negatively due to its destabilising impact on traditional channels of influence, as well as its supposed halting of sonic and cultural novelty.⁶² What has occurred, to the dismay of Reynolds, Fisher and Morley, is a flattening of historicity that destabilises the linear histories foregrounded by the curatorial journalism of the late-twentieth century.

Retromanic critics therefore lament the loss of the progressive linearity of the canonical historiography of popular music. In this context, Fisher suggests that ‘there is perhaps an element of generational resentment too: a generation younger than Reynolds is frustrated that it has yet to produce a music which can’t be comfortably fitted inside a

⁶² See, for instance, Morley’s suggestion that contemporary music lacks the emotive, sociological or even aesthetic power of the musicians that came before it such as The Smiths (October 2010) or The Rolling Stones (March 2013).

theoretical framework generated nearly two decades ago' (Fisher, quoted in Hancox, 2009). This framework, predicated on the highly public spectacle of subcultural events, is quite familiar and draws on such moments as the rise of rock 'n' roll, Beatlemania, late 1970s punk, the 'hardcore continuum', early 1990s grunge, etc. This structure has been decentred by a (I argue in the next section, Post-Internet) culture that, at its core, is profoundly ahistorical (due to its transnational communication systems and ever-expanding archival structure), and thus the conventional popular musical narrative through which novelty and innovation are identified and celebrated has become inadequate. It is here that a major flaw with contemporary critiques of music's preoccupation with the past becomes clear. While *Retromania* provides an extensive and nuanced overview of its subject matter, it maintains a narrative lens that views these supposed 'events' as signifiers of the new, drawing on 'a theoretical framework generated nearly two decades ago', as Fisher, despite coming from a retromanic perspective, acknowledges (ibid).⁶³ It might seem unfair to suggest that Reynolds, Fisher and others are writing from the vantage point of an age that lacked the symbiotic relationship to digital technologies that is outlined in the next section. However, their lament for 'music that actually *matters* in the way that the music that inspired [the post-millennial generation] did in its own day' (Reynolds, 2011, p. 172) is unjustly dismissive of contemporary musical production, and is again connected to the notion of a chronological form of musical development that does not apply as straightforwardly to the digital milieu. A typical disapproving argument regarding the apparently unfocused and rushed nature of contemporary musical production and distribution comes from self-proclaimed 'old school' hip-hop artist and 'surviv[or] [of] the Internet's rap years' Chuck Inglish:

Once people figured out how to access everything, they had no more goals for how to push it forward. [You] can listen to everything, [and] our brains are not designed to have every option. [...] I'm not saying people can't evolve past being able to process that many choices, [but] music used to be more of a sit-down type of medium. [...]

⁶³ This is a framework that is outlined in Jones (1992; 2002); Shuker (1994); Toynbee (1993); and Laing (2006).

Music wasn't just thrown around. Now it's so out of control that artists have dumbed down their process and way of thinking, like, 'let's just pump this shit out' (English, quoted in Takako, 2015)

This criticism of contemporary musicians with a 'splayed sensibility, [whose] artistic self is diffuse and centre-less [and who issue] an endlessly spewing spoor of creativity [comprising] unshelled spurts of immaterial data' (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 34) is telling. It suggests that the framework favoured by these critics cannot truly comprehend or discern the experiments in form, identity and interactivity that emerge in contemporary music making and consumption, as the 'diffuse' and 'spewing' method of musical production/reception is revealed in this thesis to be an integral – and much-celebrated, certainly among audiences – aspect of the Post-Internet musical milieu. Their writing seems linked to a twentieth century music journalism mind-set, reliant on notions of scene-based progression and constant musical upheaval that cannot be applied as readily to cultural works created in the wake of the Internet's temporal and spatial restructuring.

Reynolds claims to acknowledge the potential of the Internet for novelty and popular musical development, yet he believes that it has yet to come close to beginning to fulfil that potential.⁶⁴ He occasionally praises *YouTube* and the accessibility of multiple strands of music, but is quick to dismiss possible positives as insignificant in light of the larger problems that he discerns (Reynolds, 2011, p. 77). He essentially regards oversaturation (temporal and spatial) as entirely negative: it is a useful method of accessing archival content, but will inevitably result in disaster if it is not eventually mediated, or if the post-millennial generation is not educated in the 'correct' methods of musical consumption (hence his frequent disparaging references to people 'under the age of 25'). This again resonates with Reynolds' journalistic role as curator. His previous writing has relied on his intuition for 'interesting' or 'innovative' music, and as such his reputation has been built around his

⁶⁴ See reviews from Harper, May 2011; Doherty, 2011; and Luttmann and Doll, 2012.

ability to offer measured distinction between those sounds that ‘deserve’ to be valorised and those that merit little recognition. He is uncomfortable with the Internet’s inability to provide clear distinctions between that which he considers historically significant and that which he disapproves of. This is foregrounded in the suggestion that referential artists are bereft of new ideas. He acknowledges that ‘there are artists who are [...] finding new possibilities for creativity’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 77), but his analysis of these musicians almost unfailingly returns to their use of retrospective material.⁶⁵ While James Weissinger’s review of *Retromania* in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (June 2012) is perhaps overly sardonic in its condemnation of Reynolds’ ideas,⁶⁶ its overarching sentiment is one that I endorse. Weissinger argues that Reynolds ‘gestures toward the collapsed space of guitars and turntables, creation and curation, and makes a case for a lost “realness” to music that might never really have existed in the first place’ (Weissinger, June 2012, pp. 247-248). The notions of progression and distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ music that Reynolds mourns the ‘loss’ of in contemporary culture are outdated constructions, connected to his own experiences as a curatorial journalist.⁶⁷ In focusing on these ideas, Reynolds adopts a language and conceptual frame that is arguably inadequate for understanding the experiences of ‘younger appreciators of music [who] might be perfectly comfortable with the idea of using Internet archives and MP3 downloads to access music’ (Harper, May 2011). As

⁶⁵ For example, he briefly describes the producer Actress as ‘brilliant’ but, instead of explaining that the artist’s music engages with uniquely digital production styles and that Actress himself plays with identity in ways specific to the social networking environment (evocative of those of James Ferraro, Lil B and Hype Williams in Section Six), Reynolds exaggerates the role of the few retrospective pieces in his discography (Reynolds, 2011, p. 178). Similarly, he discusses at length the work of Daniel Lopatin in terms of its nostalgic appropriation of new technologies, as in the *YouTube* video for ‘Nobody Here’ (2009), in which Lopatin repeatedly loops a phrase from Chris DeBurgh’s 1986 single ‘Lady In Red’ and places the subsequent ambient track over an edited video from the 1992 game *Super Mario Kart* (see Figure 1). However, he fails to acknowledge that much of Lopatin’s other work (see the appendix) is intrinsically preoccupied with creating music temporally specific to the digital era (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 79-84).

⁶⁶ He describes Reynolds’ outlook as ‘often hilarious’ and like ‘blogging a dead horse’ (Weissinger, June 2012, p. 248).

⁶⁷ This role is outlined in Section Four, which studies its relative incompatibility with Post-Internet culture.

outlined in the next three sections,⁶⁸ it is necessary to develop a new framework that can more adequately measure musical ‘worth’ in the contemporary milieu in order that the changes in musical production and reception may be adequately analysed.

These writers, then, tend to view the contemporary musical milieu through the prism of anachronistic notions of scene-based innovation, distinction and cultural importance (each of which is critiqued and shown to be incommensurate to the task of accounting for contemporary music cultures within this thesis). The constant underplaying of new sounds and styles in the twenty-first century is due in part to this, as many key figures in journalism have discounted genres that have occurred online due to their perceived lack of subcultural value or their relative marginalisation. Reynolds suggests that ‘there was a manic bustle of micro-trends, subgenres and recombinant styles’ in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but dismisses them because of their limited mainstream impact and connections to pan-global web culture rather than exclusive local scenes (Reynolds, 2011, p. x). In other words, what is expected within traditional popular music culture is that a significant (and publicly spectacular) ‘new’ subculture or genre must emerge from a specific space-based location and forge a new chapter in the continuing pop narrative. Thus, subcultures such as punk, rave and grunge are continuously valorised for their aesthetically and socially subversive character, becoming canonised because of their cultural and commercial impact on the mainstream music industry and the history of popular music itself. However, the cultural splintering (as well as the associated temporal and spatial restructure) brought about by the Internet means that the conventional popular cultural platforms on which such a socially significant subculture could grow no longer exist in the same way. This is primarily linked to the decline of local exclusivities that has emerged in the face of an increasingly

⁶⁸ It is discussed respectively in relation to the notion of the Post-Internet, the changing role of authenticity, and the importance of collaborative, configurable fan-led cultures online.

globalised inter-connectivity.⁶⁹ What these new lines of communication and inspiration generate is an increase in (what I argue are) singular, marginalised instances of musical novelty. Reynolds suggests that the isolated character of these musicians and sounds constricts their social and cultural impact, thus rendering them insignificant within the evolution of popular music. Indeed, by employing negative descriptive terms such as those cited throughout this section, he implies that the sheer quantity of the music renders it less 'worthwhile' than that which is created as part of a traditional 'scene'. Fisher shares in this lamentation for music that '*matters*', arguing that

The slow cancellation of the future has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations. There can be few who believe that in [2014] a record as great as, say, The Stooges' *Funhouse* or Sly Stone's *There's A Riot Goin' On* will be released. Still less do we expect the kind of ruptures brought about by The Beatles or disco (Fisher, 2014, loc. 191)

Harper, in marked contrast to the accounts offered by Reynolds and Fisher, stresses that while 'the online landscape is unprecedented in its breadth and richness, [...] to conclude that this dissolves any sense of focus, preference, aesthetics and quality to the point where most of the music has to be written off is an overreaction' (Harper, September 2012). The devaluation of many marginalised forms of contemporary music engendered by Reynolds and others has limited the concision of both academic and journalistic analysis of it. It is undoubtedly because the Internet has been so frequently portrayed as a space defined by referentiality, regressive sounds, appropriation and 'glutted', 'clotted' music tastes (Reynolds, quoted in Hancox, 2009) that notions of authenticity have been so readily discarded in discourse surrounding digital musical milieux.⁷⁰ Fisher's previously quoted assertion that 'a generation younger than Reynolds is frustrated that it has yet to produce a music which can't be comfortably fitted inside a theoretical framework generated nearly two decades ago' (Fisher, 2009) is suggestive of the fact that retromanic criticism breeds the notion that audiences are

⁶⁹ See Section Four and Section Nine.

⁷⁰ This is illuminated further in Section Three.

so overwhelmed by the vast quantities of intrinsically ‘inauthentic’, disposable and regressive music in the present context that they instead seek more ‘honest’ and ‘real’ music from a previous time when music ‘actually mattered’. As is argued in this thesis, this is a view that fails to recognise the fact that those that have grown up alongside the web are better equipped to navigate the archival systems that they are accustomed to than those that recall a time pre-Internet, while simultaneously ignoring the authentic exhibitions of contemporary ‘cultural experience’ produced by many online musicians utilising Post-Internet themes in their work. As Soderberg argues in relation to contemporary musical production, ‘the goal of the interesting, engaged artist should be to wrestle with [the Internet’s archive] all being a little too much to handle’ as opposed to negatively retreating into historical forms of authenticity (Soderberg, October 2013). In other words, ‘engaged art embraces and reconfigures the present, it doesn’t declare it a scourge’ (ibid). Indeed, it could be argued that one of the most significant and dominant forms of retromanic nostalgia in contemporary popular music is (rather ironically) found in the critical lamentation for the previously mentioned journalistic view of musical progression. Commentators such as Morley, Reynolds and Fisher mourn a time when aesthetic innovation appeared to occur on a more easily identifiable scale than it does in the online era. As Mike Doherty astutely notes, despite their ‘future chasing’ arguments, these writers are actually ‘nostalgic for the kind of Enlightenment ideal that punk disdained – an old-fashioned way of viewing the world’ (Doherty, 2011). The digital era’s restructured systems of representation, communication, self-curation and interactivity are a key focus of this thesis, and in tracing their reconfiguration of the contemporary popular musical milieu I critique the pessimistic and anachronistic frameworks of retromanic writers.

Before introducing the next section, it is worth documenting some of the perspectives regarding retromanic discourses that emerged from interviews with Post-Internet musicians conducted for this thesis. When asked to consider retromanic ideas, most musicians agreed

that while a large amount of retrospective material is available and often drawn on, the trend does not (they believe) halt progress. Lotic and Evian Christ observed that ‘there is a thing happening now – and has been happening since Internet connections got so fast – that people [...] want to feel some real connection with’ music from the past (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014), and that ‘every generation just adds technology and smudges the things the last generation did into something new’ (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015). The web allows audiences to access archival material, and nostalgia for/references to these periods somewhat inevitably grow from this. However, the counter-argument that I have made in this section⁷¹ was echoed in the interviews. Many artists were supportive of appropriation and referentiality, arguing that innovation has always been a process in which ‘you eat all the stuff you love, process it and shit out your own version for the next people to eat’ (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014), and that ‘it’s only good that we have an infinite amount of influences’ (18+, thesis interview, 2014). Jam City, whose work seeks ‘a common ground between [his] inspirations’, is understandably ‘interested in dialogue/dissonance with past music’, although he insists that referential music must use its source material ‘to speak to [its] own sense of dislocation and anxiety’ rather than operating as a ‘pastiche’ of earlier styles (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). These statements exemplify the Post-Internet relationship that I suggest throughout this thesis many musicians and audiences now have to the Internet and the accessibility to source material that it provides.⁷² It is worth noting that Evian Christ and Finn Diesel both stated that ‘distinctions between a digital era and an analogue era aren’t useful in explaining why’ appropriation occurs (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015), as ‘the impulse to reproduce the past will always exist. [I] don’t see the difference between listening to a recording of a Gregorian chant in 1945 and dressing up like a mod and playing in a revival band in 2015’ (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015). Diesel believes that retromanic

⁷¹ This is expanded on in Section Two.

⁷² This is outlined in Section Four and Section Nine.

criticisms of the contemporary condition are limited by the fact that they uphold idealised perspectives of how innovation and progression actually functioned prior to the web's existence. Most pertinent, particularly in the context of the next section, were the reactions of artists that rejected the notion that cultural material – from the past and from global sources – is overwhelming for the current generation. Ryan Trecartin suggested that the proliferation of older cultural material in the 2010s is not as problematic as it was 'around the late-90s and early-2000s', when these archival systems were new and audiences were still learning to comprehend them (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015). Fears about the apparent inability of audiences to escape from the 'rabbit hole' of easily accessible historical influences, according to Trecartin, have been perpetuated by a generation that lacks the symbiotic relationship to digital spaces outlined in Section Two ('people born in the 80s and the 90s or something' [ibid]). Holly Herndon went further still, suggesting that Reynolds and others fail to take 'a wider view' of how music is produced in Post-Internet culture. In this context, she asserts that

A lot of the most groundbreaking practitioners get overlooked because they are too smart and curious to limit their practice solely to music – and music theorists are retromanic in that they only factor in musicians releasing albums or whatever into their theories. [...] If you aren't looking at other fields, then you aren't in an advantageous position to talk about contemporary culture. The best people are active everywhere (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014)

This supports my claim that it is (rather ironically) retromanic to apply pre-Internet modes of popular music analysis to a milieu that is incompatible with these frameworks. The majority of the musicians analysed in this thesis have worked across the spectrum of the arts, incorporating video, fashion, performance and social media into their work. They may not have produced an album that would fit comfortably into the canonical historiography that Reynolds and Fisher lament, but that is because that system – as is argued throughout – is no longer applicable to what I describe in the next section as a Post-Internet culture. Instead, as ADR argues, there is 'a version of new that is unique to the digital era' that is built around 'previously undiscovered combinations of existing tropes' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015).

Self-conscious examples of this ‘version of new’ are focused on throughout this thesis. Generally, then, there is a rejection of Reynolds’ conceptual frame by contemporary musicians and artists. They celebrate the appropriation that he critiques, dismissing his narrow definition of ‘innovation’ and suggesting that he is speaking from a position that does not fully comprehend the relationship that the current generation has with virtual environments. Indeed, as in the case of SOPHIE, several of these musicians regard his theoretical apparatus as ‘the antithesis of what [they are] interested in’ (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015).

The first section of this thesis has critiqued the ideas that have afforded retromanic discourse such a prominent role in contemporary analyses of popular music. I have questioned the frameworks of such critics to make clear that there are significant reasons why this conceptual frame is not commensurate to the task of assessing the character and contours of a music culture that has undergone significant shifts in relation to communication, distribution, identity politics, fan-curation and channels of influence. The chapters that follow are in large part a response to these retromanic themes, looking at the work of musicians who seek to engage with the very fabric of this evolving online culture through every aspect of their work and revealing the continuing importance of authenticity in relation to this trend. Section Four offers an in-depth overview of blogging culture and the collapse of notions of ‘scene’-based innovations, stressing the criticisms of retromanic ideas that I have outlined above. The final six sections explore the sounds, visual styles and representational experiments of musicians whose work is intrinsically entwined with issues of the digital. This material serves to dispute and critique the retromanic argument. However, before I present this work, it is necessary to provide what I suggest is a more appropriate conceptual frame through which contemporary music culture can be understood: the notion of the ‘Post-Internet’ generation.

Chapter 1 – Section 2: The Post-Internet and *DIS Magazine*

My entire adult life has been in the age of Internet overload. [...] Access to the infinite, constantly shifting archive of all culture ever seems to be the most potent agent in altering the way contemporary media is consumed and created (ADR, thesis interview, 2015)

Having identified and problematised the prevailing retromanic view of many popular music writers in the web era, I now provide a terminology and framework that more usefully encapsulates the overriding themes and ideas of digital musical milieux. This is based on a concept that has become increasingly prominent in contemporary artistic discourse since the early 2010s: the Post-Internet (Wallace, 2014; Cornell, 2013; Kholief, 2014; Archey and Peckham, October 2014). The idea of the Post-Internet ‘emerged’, notes Cornell, ‘in a moment when there was a dearth of criticism to describe art that acknowledged the effects of the Internet in its process or realization but which didn’t exist [exclusively] online or within technological form’ (Cornell, 2013). The term refers to art that specifically explores the transformative effect of contemporary technology. As Chris Wiley explains, ‘both technology and corporate culture are almost universally represented in [Post-Internet art], [reflecting] a post-human future in which our lives will become increasingly artificial, monetized and controlled’ (Wiley, 2013). Post-Internet art’s key protagonists have emerged alongside and in conjunction with the Internet, and have gone on to generate an aesthetic that invokes and engages with the prominent place that the web has had within their lives. It is named in relation to its difference from ‘Internet’ art or ‘net’ art,⁷³ referring instead to a generation (‘Generation Z’ [La Ferla, February 2015]) whose lives are increasingly intertwined with digital spaces and contemporary technology. This section begins to elaborate the term – which remains in its infancy, and has been frequently misused and tarnished by attempts to connect it to self-consciously ironic scenes and aesthetics – as I regard it as a useful analytical tool to unify and make sense of the work of many musicians operating online. I offer a

⁷³ This is a distinction that is made below.

definition of the concept in its current form, exploring its connections to contemporary art. I then examine major exponents of this trend, such as *DIS Magazine*, who have taken the notion of the Post-Internet and afforded it a distinct (if problematic) aesthetic style. Connecting this to the present musical context serves to demonstrate that music is being produced that is intrinsically concerned with examining the digital spaces that it occupies, which is a theme that has yet to be unearthed in studies of contemporary musical production. These themes are then fused with ideas about authenticity analysed in the next chapter to investigate the ways in which these self-conscious considerations of issues of Post-Internet identity – making ‘best use of the interconnectivity we have available to us’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014) – can be regarded as being true to the ‘cultural experiences’ of audiences that hold a similar relationship with digital technologies.

I begin by introducing the notion of ‘Post-Internet art’. While the term itself has appeared in artistic discourse since at least 2008/2009,⁷⁴ a more thorough classification and application did not emerge until 2012/2013 and, more prominently, 2014. The October 2014 PDF file ‘Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION/DATA’ was edited and distributed by Karen Archey and Robin Peckham in conjunction with the UCCA, and outlined a clear manifesto for the artistic style. It offers a thorough definition of what is meant by the term Post-Internet:

The most pressing condition underlying contemporary culture today – from artistic practice and social theory to our quotidian language – may well be the omnipresence of the Internet. Though the terminology with which we describe these phenomena is still nascent and not yet in widespread use, [...] art that is controversially defined as ‘Post-Internet’ [is] consciously created in a milieu that assumes the centrality of the network, and that often takes everything from the physical bits to the social ramifications of the Internet as fodder. From the changing nature of the image to the circulation of cultural objects, from the politics of participation to new understandings of materiality, the interventions presented under this rubric attempt nothing short of the redefinition of art for the age of the Internet. This understanding of the Post-Internet refers not to a time ‘after’ the Internet, but rather to an Internet state of mind – to think in the fashion of the network (Archey and Peckham, 2014, p. 8)

⁷⁴ It was coined by Marisa Olson in an interview with Régine Debatty in 2008 and was initially outlined and defined in texts such as Artie Vierkant’s ‘The Image Object Post-Internet’ (2010) and Gene McHugh’s *Post Internet: Notes on the Internet and Art 12/29/09>09/05/10* (2011).

In other words, as alluded to above, the Post-Internet era is defined by a full comprehension of and accepted cohabitation with the systems, technologies, communicative processes and identity politics that comprise the web. This separates generations that have grown up (and will continue to do so) alongside the Internet from those that can recall an ‘analogue’ time without the same omnipresence of these technological forms. The argument, as suggested above, is that thinking ‘in the fashion of the network’ is something that occurs organically for those that simply accept the ‘centrality’ of the Internet within contemporary culture as a wholly commonplace aspect of everyday life. It refers to those brought up in the post-millennial era with little experience of a world without smartphones, constant connectivity or social media. There are, according to Post-Internet artists, clear shifts from generation to generation in relation to the comprehension of this omniscient technology⁷⁵ and this is indicated by the selection of the prefix ‘post’. It differentiates, say, those that were born or reached pubescence in the mid-2000s or later from those born earlier: the ‘Internet’ generation for whom the web was something new, exciting and perhaps frightening, rather than a normalised element of everyday life. This is obviously not to suggest that people over a certain age are in some way incapable of understanding or utilising online spaces, of course. That would be a severely unsubstantiated argument, and it is not the perspective promoted by Post-Internet theory. However, if someone has spent their entire conscious lives surrounded by the digital, and therefore has no comprehension of a world without it, their Post-Internet condition dictates that they are entirely receptive to (or even at one with) these technologies and virtual spaces. This internalisation is far more relatable to those whose lives have always been intertwined with the Internet. Archey and Peckham state that Post-Internet art demonstrates

⁷⁵ This is a theme exemplified in everyday anecdotes about very young children playing with tablets and touch-screens in ways that their parents struggle to match or comprehend.

a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception. [It] employs the visual rhetoric of advertising, graphic design, stock imagery, corporate branding, visual merchandising, and commercial software tools, [while considering] issues related to Internet policy, mass clandestine surveillance and data mining, the physicality of the network, the posthuman body, radicalized information dispersion, and the open source movement. It looks at changes taking place in the age of the ubiquitous Internet, from information dispersion and artwork documentation to human language and approaches to art history (Archey and Peckham, 2014, pp. 8-9)

What this indicates is that art in the Post-Internet era assumes a symbiotic relationship with post-millennial media formats and explores the impact of this relationship self-consciously.⁷⁶

Artist Mat Dryhurst argues that

90s media art was this strange kind of evolutionary waiting room – there was this period of time where computation was getting faster, devices were becoming domesticated, [and] the art world hadn't really caught up yet. Media artists had to build their own parallel camp to the side, basically just waiting for everyone else to concede that yeah, our relationships with tech are important! Now we have reached that point, and so I feel in a way we live in an exciting time. [...] I have a lot of time for the 'Post-Internet' canon (Dryhurst, quoted in Sutherland, 2015)

Post-Internet art accepts that the web is now such a central aspect of youths' everyday lives that 'distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed, [meaning that people are] online all the time', even when they are not physically staring at a screen (Cornell, 2013). Cornell explains that 'the way we access and circulate information has changed profoundly, as have our behaviours [and] even the way we think', and it is critical that art begins to contemplate the wider ramifications for identity in a world that is simultaneously digital and analogue, virtual and physical, cybernetic and organic (ibid). In ADR's interview for this thesis, he referred to the fact that 'Post-Internet artists [have] multiple browser windows open, all competing for attention' in both their virtual *and* physical lives/worlds (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). As Mark Fisher accurately notes, 'with cyberspace available on every smartphone handset, we are never outside [...] the digital realm' (Fisher, 2014, loc. 3368).

⁷⁶ See, for example, the 'new media' art of the 1990s or the retromanic mash-ups of the early-2000s described in Sinnreich, 2010.

Academic and blogger Nathan Jurgenson has become one of the most incisive voices emphasising the lack of separation between virtual and physical spaces/identities. In his 2012 article ‘The IRL Fetish’ he expresses his disapproval about attempts to render the online ‘inauthentic’ in contrast with the ‘real’ world. He criticises those that celebrate taking breaks from their technological devices, asserting that ‘we’ve been told to resist technological intrusions and aspire to consume less information: turn off your phones, log off social media, and learn to reconnect offline’ (Jurgenson, 2012). Jurgenson explains that the problem with this mentality – one that is indicative of the ‘Internet’ rather than the ‘Post-Internet’ generation – is that it makes the mistake of assuming using digital technology means ‘leaving the here and now for something digital, some other, cyber, space’ (ibid). In actuality, the Post-Internet era is marked by the fact that there is no difference between being online and offline: everyone is constantly and ‘symbiotically’ connected to virtual spaces at all times (ibid). Rather than ‘viewing the online and offline as largely distinct’, and thus maintaining a belief in ‘digital dualism’, it is crucial that academia and art develop a ‘far more synthetic understanding of technology and society, media and bodies, physicality and information as perpetually enmeshed and co-determining’ (Jurgenson, 2014). While he does not specifically evoke the concept of the ‘Post-Internet’, the term can certainly be applied to his ideas. He argues that

If we can fix this false separation and view the digital and physical as enmeshed, we will understand that what we do while connected is inseparable from what we do when disconnected. That is, disconnection from the smartphone and social media isn’t really disconnection at all: the logic of social media follows us long after we log out. There was and is no offline. [...] Our lived reality is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline. [We] live in an augmented reality that exists at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the off and the online. It is wrong to say ‘IRL’ to mean offline: *Facebook* is real life (Jurgenson, 2012)

Post-Internet theory states that contemporary youths are increasingly hybridised with virtual environments and digital technologies, and that these phenomena are intrinsically inseparable

from their real lives and identities.⁷⁷ It is not that web users ‘escape’ into their technology, as in the fantasies of much science fiction;⁷⁸ rather, this technology is now so ubiquitous that it must be considered an actual part of the ‘real’ world, constantly bleeding into everyday existence. The themes described by Jurgenson have nuanced much discussion of the Post-Internet,⁷⁹ and are thus returned to throughout this thesis. A key aspect of Post-Internet artworks, then, is that they do not necessarily ‘exist online or within technological form’ (Cornell, 2013). Where previous ‘Internet’ art held an inseparable relationship to the technology that it explored (utilising digital animation and virtual environments in isolation from ‘physical’ spaces), Post-Internet art illuminates the ways in which virtual spaces are impacting on the real world by exploiting artistic disciplines that are not necessarily web-specific. Much Post-Internet art thus takes the form of fashion,⁸⁰ video installations,⁸¹ art exhibitions,⁸² performance⁸³ and, critically, the music analysed throughout this thesis.⁸⁴ Crucially, these artistic disciplines existed prior to the Internet. Fashion, film, performance, photography and music did not grow out of post-millennial media, but are now largely affected by its developments. Applying web-based aesthetics and themes to these forms creates digital art that moves beyond technological restraint. This art is truly ‘Post-Internet’

⁷⁷ The increasing popularity of 3D printing is a physical symbol of these ideas, as virtual creations from digital spaces are being literally transformed into solid, ‘real world’ artefacts through this process.

⁷⁸ Some of these science fiction narratives are highlighted in greater depth in Section Seven.

⁷⁹ Other key texts on the topic include Lizzie Homersham’s ‘Artists Must Eat’ (2015); *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*, a collection of essays edited by Omar Kholfief (2014); and (most crucially) Jonathan Openshaw’s *Postdigital Artisans: Craftsmanship with a New Aesthetic in Fashion, Art, Design and Architecture* (2015), which (while using the term ‘postdigital’ instead of ‘Post-Internet’) illuminates crucial examples of visual art, sculpture, architecture and fashion in this mould.

⁸⁰ E.g. Hood By Air, Telfar, Shanzhai Biennial, VFiles, etc. (Figures 2-4).

⁸¹ E.g. Thunder Horse Video, Ryan Trecartin, OKFocus, Tabor Robak, Jesse Kanda, Lizzie Fitch, Sophia Al Maria, etc. (Figures 5-11).

⁸² E.g. *DIS Magazine*, Dom Sebastian, Francesca Gavin, Spencer Longo, LuckyPDF, Cory Arcangel, aids-3d, GCC, Petra Collins, TCF, Chino Amobi, Oliver Laric, Kari Altmann, etc. (Figures 12-24).

⁸³ E.g. Wu Tsang and boyChild, Colin Self, Mathew Dryhurst and Holly Herndon, Mykki Blanco and the performers at Ashland Mines’ 2012 *Blasting Voice* exhibition (Figures 25-28).

⁸⁴ This aesthetic style was exhibited in an early form at UCCA’s 2014 exhibition *Art Post-Internet* (curated by Archey and Peckham) in Beijing, which featured installations and performances by many of the artists referred to above. I go into more depth regarding some of these artistic approaches later in this section, although much of this analysis continues throughout the latter sections of the thesis.

as it does not distinguish between the physical and the virtual, and instead explores their intertwined relationship.

To briefly stress these ideas further, before offering a more substantial analysis of the aesthetics of Post-Internet art, I introduce two concepts that are entwined completely with the notion of a generation that is inseparable from their digital environments. The first is information noise, which is a result of the ‘crisis of over-documentation’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 55) generated by the digital era. Reynolds outlines the repercussions of this ‘crisis’ for popular music in the article ‘Excess All Areas’ (Reynolds, June 2011, pp. 31-34), but before highlighting his argument it is worth noting previous academic work regarding ‘over-documentation’ online. The bulk of discourse on this subject is predicated on the dystopian notion of ‘information overload’, which has been a prominent theme for media scholars even prior to the Internet’s conception.⁸⁵ However, it has been applied more frequently and comprehensively to analysis of (Post-)Internet culture.⁸⁶ Pre-Internet, scholarly discourse regarding technological developments frequently centred on whether the impact of ‘information overload’ was an issue for concern or merely causing unmerited panic.⁸⁷ With the increasing rise of digital media in the twenty-first century, however, the debate has shifted. There is little doubt in academia that the complete integration of ‘cable television, the Internet, smart phones, blogging, and online social networking into’ everyday life has resulted in an overflow of information that impacts heavily on contemporary media users (Hargittai, Neuman and Curry, 2012, p. 161). What has subsequently become the focal point of present discourse is the ways in which this information overload manifests itself in the

⁸⁵ Jacob Jacoby studied the concept extensively in 1974 and 1984.

⁸⁶ See Hargittai, Neuman and Curry, 2012; Jones, Ravid and Rafaeli, June 2004; Shenk, 1998; and Gitlin, 2002

⁸⁷ Jacob Jacoby’s initial use of the term is in reaction to the notion ‘that there could be dysfunctional consequences resulting from providing consumers with “too much” information’, which is a fear that developed due to the technological changes (particularly in media) of the late-twentieth century (Jacoby, 1984, p. 432). Jacoby’s ideas seem prophetic in light of more contemporary technological developments, but it is worth noting that the results of his empirical research varied at different times: his earlier work (1974) is far more concerned about the potential effects of information overload than his 1984 study, which finds that ‘consumers can handle large amounts of information and are not likely to be overloaded’ (Jacoby, 1984, p. 432).

behavioural patterns and psyches of (especially) post-millennial (and therefore Post-Internet) youths. Hargittai, Neuman and Curry argue that the prominence of digital media produces ‘addicts’ that are so preoccupied with their personal technological spaces that they become ‘disengaged’ from the social communities of the physical world (Hargittai, Neuman and Curry, 2012, p. 162). They outline four key ‘structural conditions’ of human behaviour and the ways that these are affected by an overflow of information:

1. Time sensitivity: A key element in the perception of ‘overload’ is the limitation of time for reviewing available information.
2. Decision requirement: Related to time sensitivity are the time constraints on actual decision making, especially critical decisions.
3. Structure of information: The ‘amount’ of information may be less critical than the extent to which the information is structured, permitting the observer to retrieve what is judged to be relevant.
4. Quality of information: Many grievances about ‘information overload’ turn out actually to concern the quality of information or the information variant of the engineering concept of signal-to-noise ratio (ibid)

In other words, an individual’s ability to make ‘critical decisions’, comprehend time and form distinctions between varying qualities of information is distorted or even damaged by the magnitude of material that contemporary media forces them to process. Shenk refers to this overload as ‘data smog’, in that a web user’s psychological vision is clouded and disconnected from the ‘real’ world due to the ever-present nature of media in their lives (Shenk, 1998). Regardless of terminology,⁸⁸ the impact of this disconnection and addiction to digital technology is largely considered by academics to be negative. Sanders, Field, Diego and Kaplan ‘investigated whether higher levels of Internet use are associated with depression and social isolation among adolescents’, with the finding that ‘high Internet use is related to weaker social ties’ suggesting intrinsic links between over-exposure to media information and feelings of loneliness or isolation (Sanders, Field, Diego and Kaplan, 2000). Further evidence of this can be found in the empirical analysis of Kraut et al, which discovered that

⁸⁸ ‘Information overflow’, ‘data smog’, ‘information noise’ and ‘information overload’ are all widely employed terms for the same phenomenon, and are utilised synonymously throughout this thesis.

‘greater use of the Internet [is] associated with increased depression’, while the ‘interpersonal communication applications currently prevalent on the Internet [...] tend to undercut’ development of social skills ‘rather than promote them’ (Kraut et al, 1998). Fisher asserts that there is ‘excessive strain put on people’s nervous systems by new informational technologies. [People become] banal cyborg[s], punished whenever they unplug from the communicative matrix’ (Fisher, 2014, loc. 2572). Over-exposure to the channels that provide this ‘cacophony of information’ (18+, quoted in Cliff, August 2015) seemingly causes isolation, disconnection and depression, alongside an unstable sense-of-self (‘people become one another and lose themselves’ [ibid]) generated by a lack of social engagement with communities in the physical world.

Reynolds, Morley and Fisher apply themes of information overload to their concept of retromania, arguing that the ‘dispersed, tantalised [and] teased’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 73) attention of contemporary musicians has resulted in music exemplified by its ‘diffuse and centre-less’ nature (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 34). The phenomenon that they believe causes this diffusion is the over-sharing culture of the web, forming a generation that is exposed to ‘virtually everything happening across the world’, in addition to ‘virtually everything that *ever happened*’ (ibid). Individuals (and thus musicians) are granted access to an almost infinite amount of cultural material through *Twitter* feeds, the visual archive of *YouTube* and omniscient search engines such as *Google*, resulting in (in the view of these critics) music that lacks coherence.⁸⁹ The rise of retromania, they claim, is partially the consequence of a need to escape from the pressure of information overload that dominates the present context, seeking authentic music (and cultural material generally) from a ‘simpler’ era when access was far more regimented and limited. Essentially, then, information noise/overload is a term that describes the impact that over-exposure to cultural material, newsfeeds and digital

⁸⁹ Reynolds refers to the dominant resultant sound as a form of ‘digital maximalism’, which is the ultimate incarnation of the ‘properties of post-everything omnivorousness, structural convolution, and texture-saturated overload’ that exemplify twenty-first century life (Reynolds, December 2011).

technologies has on the Post-Internet generation. Contemporary audiences and, by extension, musicians are victims of an ‘insomniac [...] besieging of attention’ (Fisher, 2014, loc. 288), with their lives defined by an ‘attention-deficit disorder’ brought about by these vast quantities of information. 140-character tweets, emojis, and leading ‘click-bait’ headlines designed to entice would-be readers have become increasingly ubiquitous, given their ability to rapidly evoke a response from web users allegedly unable or unwilling to focus for any extended length of time. This, according to Reynolds and his fellow critics, results in a generation incapable of fully absorbing ideas, culture or, more particularly, music. Instead, commonplace diffusion and mutability create unstable identities and inconsistent taste values. Fisher suggests that ‘we are overwhelmed by the incessant demands of digital communications [and] are simply too busy to engage in arts of enjoyment – highs have to come in a no-fuss, hyperbolic form so that we can quickly return to checking email or updates on social networking sites’ (Fisher, 2014, loc. 2652). He connects this to retromanic discourses, arguing that

Producing the new depends upon certain kinds of withdrawal. [...] The currently dominant form of socially networked cyberspace, with its endless opportunities for micro-contact and its deluge of *YouTube* links, has made withdrawal more difficult than ever before. [...] Everyday life has sped up, but culture has slowed down (Fisher, 2014, loc. 306-310)

Although I would argue that many of these readings are unfairly negative and suggestive of an alarmist ‘Internet’ generational reaction to a Post-Internet culture that is not fully comprehensible to them,⁹⁰ several of these ideas do remain useful when understanding the entwined relationship between post-millennial digital consumers and their technological devices. It is interesting that the notion of retromania is one that is driven by nostalgia for an analogue era. Given their connections to the ‘Internet’ era, these writers arguably lack the same organic relationship with the archival systems and communicative processes of digital

⁹⁰ As argued in the previous section, one of the largest assumptions of these critics is that overexposure to the web has halted innovation.

culture that define the Post-Internet generation. As Fisher notes, his generation is on one ‘side of a temporal split’ and ‘will never be able to adjust to the paradoxes of the new situation’ (Fisher, 2014, loc. 178). These critics see problems with distinction, information overload and alinearity that are perhaps indicative of an uncertain, non-symbiotic separation from virtual environments that, according to the concept of the Post-Internet, simply are not an issue for those that have never experienced a pre-Internet life. Holly Herndon argues that ‘attention economy stuff seems like a cheap point’, as ‘the way in which we interact with [contemporary] technology is altering our physical and emotive states’ in a ‘symbiotic’ way (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). In other words, people that have grown up alongside information noise are less likely to be overwhelmed by it due to its consistent, almost organic, presence in their lives.⁹¹ Finn Diesel, the musical editor of *DIS*, even celebrated the ‘incredibly satisfying’ impact that ‘sensory overload’ has on him and his work (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015). None of the musicians that were interviewed for this thesis denied the prominence of information noise, yet it is notable that very few expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of the phenomenon.^v The artists, on the contrary, seemed pleased with the availability of multiple strands of influence: a further indicator of the organic relationship that the Post-Internet generation has with post-millennial communication devices. ADR went so far as to assert that his ‘entire adult life has been in the age of Internet overload’, and that ‘access to the infinite, constantly shifting archive of all culture ever seems to be the most potent agent in altering the way contemporary media is consumed and created’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015).⁹²

⁹¹ This is a theme that runs through the entirety of the interview with Ryan Trecartin conducted for this thesis (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015).

⁹² Section Four explores some of these aspects in further detail, highlighting the experiential differences of two very different popular musical generations, while the role of information noise in the work of contemporary musicians is stressed most prominently in Section Six (in relation to social networking), Section Eight (with regard to Post-Internet identity) and Section Nine (in analysis of collage-esque musical compositions).

A second concept that is a key element of the Post-Internet condition is the ‘virtual plaza’, a term coined by Adam Harper in his analysis of the web-based genre vaporwave⁹³ (Harper, 12 July 2012). The term ‘virtual plaza’ references shopping malls that are ‘the nexus of infinite social, cultural and financial transactions and the scene of their greatest activity and spectacle’ (ibid). Harper is alluding to the vast retail outlets in the Middle East (most prominently Dubai) marked by the ‘mass of ostentatious wealth, garish spectacle[s] and [...] stock sounds’ experienced while consumers wander through them (Kretowicz, December 2013). These spaces are architectural shrines to hyper-capitalism, with their relaxing background music and flamboyant décor designed to pacify would-be buyers and make them feel welcome within buildings lined with boutiques, restaurants and bars. A plaza is ‘a corporate-sponsored marble square between office blocks lined with *Starbucks* and *Pret*s and *Yo Sushis*, or a glittering premier hotel staffed with the prettiest serfs, or an enormous semi-underground cathedral of consumerism’ (Harper, 12 July 2012). Essentially, then, it is a corporate arena that aims to provide a soothing atmosphere for potential consumers. Yet Harper’s term emphasises the ‘virtual’ aspect of the plaza. The ‘virtual plaza’ refers to the fact that the ‘new’ consumer space is the digital environment, a phenomenon outlined in Foley (September 2013), Dawson and Foster (1996) and Schiller (1999). These texts suggest that the Internet provides potential for deregulation that, rather than allowing for greater freedom of expression for individuals, actually offers further possibilities for corporations to monitor and exploit the interests of their consumers. Fuchs (2012) stresses the methods used by companies to track and access an individual’s data through their social media accounts. This tracking enables automated advertising systems to ‘select’ products and services that are specific to each individual, generating a ‘plaza’ sculpted around the precise interests and needs of each web user (ibid). The ‘physical’ pacification techniques utilised in shopping

⁹³ See Section Five.

malls (relaxing music, lavish furnishings, water fountains, etc.) are rendered virtual and consumer-specific, with the ultimate aim that each individual should eventually attain a digital experience that fulfils each of their exacting desires. This constant appeasement amplifies the narcissism and individualism of Post-Internet web users,⁹⁴ as their virtual world is tailored to gratify each of them singularly. In other words, the ‘virtual plaza’ that Harper is referring to is the Internet itself, an arena that is proliferated with advertisements and corporate branding.⁹⁵ Finance and consumerism are critical and inevitable aspects of Post-Internet existence. Harper is indicating that people whose whole lives have been surrounded by the virtual plaza, having known no life prior to its dominance, take its hyper-corporate aspects to be the norm. The notion of the virtual plaza is critical to the Post-Internet art style, with ‘a sampling of commercial aesthetics [becoming] a response to established lo-fi aesthetics of underground art and music’s history, [and] a critique of the inundation of these types of hi-def aesthetics that our generation faces daily’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). These artists employ imagery that mirrors ‘the constant self-mutations of capitalist iconography, including the neuroticism and surrealism of the mainstream’ (Ugelvig, March 2015). This virtual plaza aesthetic is ‘overtly uncanny and disturbing [due to its] complete devotion to the aggressive hyper-capitalist language of advertising’ (ibid). Given their constant engagement with corporate digital spaces and imagery, Post-Internet artists are forced (perhaps involuntarily) to generate work that explores the issues of hyper-capitalist environments. Much of the music emphasised throughout this thesis comparably ‘critiques and subverts the capitalist system through [its] apparent collusion but actual subversion of it’ (ibid), and the themes, style and approach of *DIS Magazine* are key to this trend.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ This is discussed in greater depth in Section Six.

⁹⁵ The web even has its own form of virtual currency, with the digital ‘money’ Bitcoin rising to prominence in the wake of the 2008 global market crash (Sivy, 2013; Andreessen, 2014; Jones, October 2013; Anderson, August 2014).

⁹⁶ These issues are developed in further depth in the fifth and tenth sections.

Information noise and the virtual plaza, then, are two aspects of contemporary culture that Post-Internet art explores as elements of everyday post-millennial life. As Ryan Trecartin suggests, information noise is now ‘a natural extension of how our brains work. It’s just that we have more of an ability to tap into these ways of communicating’ than previous generations and ‘every year we acclimate to a faster pace’ (Trecartin, quoted in Kitamura and Kunzru, 2011). Chris Wiley argues that ‘both technology and corporate culture are almost universally represented in [Post-Internet art], [reflecting] a post-human future in which our lives will become increasingly artificial, monetized and controlled’ (Wiley, 2013). *DIS Magazine* is the focal point of this artistic style, as it draws on the web-specific aesthetics of, for instance, the virtual plaza, and applies them to formats outside of the digital realm. As ADR explains, *DIS*

have carved out an aesthetic world and conceptual perspective that has been hugely influential on a generation of artists and musicians working online. [They] support a diverse community of multi-racial, young, queer artists whose voices could otherwise be subjugated (ADR, thesis interview, 2015)

By analysing *DIS* and, throughout the remainder of the thesis, musicians self-consciously engaged with digital culture, I further develop the notion of the Post-Internet as an aesthetic trend and investigate its connections to representing the ‘truth of’ Post-Internet ‘cultural experience’. *DIS Magazine* is an online exhibition space for Post-Internet artwork. Beginning as a fashion e-zine in 2010, curated by Solomon Chase, Lauren Boyle, Nick Scholl, David Toro and Marco Roso, *DIS* ultimately expanded into the realms of conceptual art, photography and (most crucially for this thesis) music, employing a revolving selection of music editors such as Patrik Sandberg, J-Cush,⁹⁷ Physical Therapy⁹⁸ and Finn Diesel⁹⁹ (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014). Other musicians interviewed for this research¹⁰⁰ have also been ‘consulted several times’ in relation to the site’s musical direction, and have contributed

⁹⁷ J-Cush is the Lit City Trax label-head and a member of Future Brown (see Section Nine).

⁹⁸ Physical Therapy is a DJ associated with *GHE20G0TH1K* (see Section Nine).

⁹⁹ Finn Diesel is an associate of the label PC Music (see Section Five).

¹⁰⁰ Fatima Al Qadiri and ADR are the most prominent examples of this.

a substantial amount of their own work to *DIS* (ibid). As its disciplinary interests have become increasingly eclectic, the e-zine's audience has expanded to the extent that *DIS* is now a key curatorial force in web-based artistic production. The stylistic trends of Post-Internet art have been developed through the work exhibited by *DIS*. A significant portion of *DIS'* website is dedicated to self-conscious digital music, hosting mixes by and interviews with key figures in the milieu. As such, given *DIS'* role in Post-Internet art and its foregrounding of music that upholds this style, it is crucial to explore the aesthetic and thematic values that the e-zine promotes. I begin by explaining that *DIS* is a web-specific 'platform for an attitude towards product and image-making' that is indebted to virtual spaces (Haj-Najafi, August 2011), before analysing the magazine's broader impact on online artistic culture.

First it is necessary to outline the aesthetics that dominate *DIS*-related work and the themes that the magazine explores. The major focus of *DIS* was initially fashion, but the aim of the e-zine is to break down boundaries 'between disciplines' (Duncan, August 2012) and draw on the blurring of binaries between the virtual and the physical in the Post-Internet context. The e-zine's manifesto states that

DIS is a multimedia [...] dissection of fashion and commerce which seeks to dissolve conventions, distort realities, disturb ideologies, dismember the establishment, and disrupt the dismal dissemination of fashion discourse that's been distinctly distributed in order to display the disenfranchised as disposable. All is open to discussion. There is no final word (*DIS*, March 2010)

The name '*DIS*' alludes to the prefix 'dis', which delineates 'the opposite or absence of' (Haj-Najafi, August 2011). The editors explain that 'like the prefix, *DIS* is oppositional. In the beginning, it appeared that *DIS* would operate solely in the negative but as we grew we realized more and more that we wanted to offer alternatives and open doors' (ibid). From its very inception, then, *DIS* was intended to be deliberately provocative and different, promoting radical and unusual art/fashion with an emphasis on specifically digital aesthetics

and discourse. Digital video, GIF animation, social media and music-hosting sites such as *SoundCloud* are all exploited in *DIS* articles, and examples of musical engagements with these phenomena can be found throughout this thesis.^{vi} In addition, *DIS* promotes artists whose work fuses explorations of Post-Internet identity with non-virtual artistic formats.^{vii} They cite artists as diverse as Ryan Trecartin,¹⁰¹ Lil B¹⁰² and #HDBOYZ¹⁰³ as like-minded figures in their orbit (ibid). They also exhibit the Post-Internet fashion of labels such as Telfar, Shanzhai Biennial, VFiles, #BEENTRILL# and, most crucially for this research, Hood By Air, whose designs animate the collapsing of boundaries between the digital and the physical.^{viii} Hood By Air founder and *GHE20G0TH1K*¹⁰⁴ DJ Shayne Oliver is the most experimental of these designers. His work (created in tandem with designer Akeem Smith and vocalist Ian Isiah) provides perhaps the most powerful symbol of Post-Internet aesthetics in fashion to date, and his significance was cited throughout interviews for this thesis with associates such as Evian Christ, Lotic and, most prominently, Arca. Indeed, Arca suggested that ‘just by existing the way he does [Shayne] inspired a lot of people. [...] It’s crazy to say anyone’s at the centre of something, but he’s very close to the centre of it for sure’ (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). With his perceived position at the hub of this Post-Internet creative milieu, Oliver’s work is referred to throughout this thesis.¹⁰⁵ Oliver is intrigued by the relationship that post-millennial youths have with virtual spaces and has, as such, developed an industrial ‘cyberpunk’ aesthetic (Thorne, 2014, p. 132) informed by a Post-Internet blurring of physical and digital identities.¹⁰⁶ His style fuses straightjackets, bondage, padlocks, multiple zippers, PVC and leather – all restrictive and niche clothing types – with public street-wear formats such as t-shirts, shorts and tracksuits (see Figures 29 and 30). The

¹⁰¹ Ryan Trecartin is a queer digital video director examined in Section Seven.

¹⁰² Lil B is an online rap star of *YouTube*, *Twitter* and *MySpace* fame, analysed in Section Six.

¹⁰³ #HDBOYZ are a boy band pastiche highlighted in Section Five.

¹⁰⁴ See Section Nine.

¹⁰⁵ See Section Seven, Section Nine and the conclusion of this thesis.

¹⁰⁶ This is the focus of the seventh and eighth sections.

excessive use of metal and plastic elements such as PVC, zippers and padlocks alludes to the work of industrial musicians and artists in the 1980s and 1990s, whose imagery and sounds were similarly preoccupied with machinery (Reed, 2013), and is a reference to ‘wearing’ contemporary technology¹⁰⁷ (Gibb, December 2011). Oliver is making a statement about the lack of distinction or restriction in an era of eroded attention spans and information noise. Reflecting on Oliver’s 2015 runway season, Olivia Singer relates that

The faces of the models were trapped within hosiery, their features contorted and blurred. Their mouths were gated and secured with signature HBA padlocks. Their arms were sometimes strapped down by their sides, their legs wrapped in cords. Entitled ‘Daddy’, there was a clear message of fetish-style restriction (Singer, February 2015)

His clothing designs are a self-conscious effort to invoke the increasing prominence of virtual environments in the ‘real’ world. Technology is inescapable and controlling, and Post-Internet audiences are symbolically ‘wearing’ it when they dress in Hood By Air. It is worth noting, however, that Oliver’s work is not critical of this Post-Internet condition of struggling to differentiate between reality and the digital. Rather, his output celebrates the relationship between these spaces. His clothes are customisable, with removable and additional parts (usually signified by zippers) enabling the wearer to constantly change their look (redolent of his shape-shifting DJ work with Post-Internet queer club night *GHE20G0THIK*).¹⁰⁸ This has significant ramifications for notions of mutability and fluidity in Post-Internet identity politics.¹⁰⁹ *DIS* has a strong interest in queer artists and progressive post-millennial identity. This is a key focus of later sections of this thesis, given the importance that digital spaces play in the generation of new and mutable genders, personas and identities. *DIS* and Hood By Air are at the forefront of a Post-Internet trend that ‘blurs the lines of race, gender and

¹⁰⁷ This is a term utilised by Post-Internet musician James Ferraro (Gibb, December 2011) and discussed in Section Six.

¹⁰⁸ See Section Nine.

¹⁰⁹ This is the focus of Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Oliver’s designs, as well as his connections to and influence on contemporary music more specifically, are returned to in these chapters.

sexuality' (Newell-Hanson, March 2015). This is a theme that is located in the output of many Post-Internet musicians.¹¹⁰ ix

DIS and its collaborators are thus deemed to be echoing and celebrating the Internet that birthed and houses them. Their output utilises digital video, MP3 files, hyper-synthetic sounds, garish colours and spam advertising: hyper-digital web-specific aesthetics that are juxtaposed with their thematic contents, which primarily consider contemporary human identity. This shows a refusal to artistically separate the digital realm from the 'real world' as the two become increasingly entwined. *DIS*' consumers are confronted with constant cybernetic images and sounds, with no escape to a reassuringly nostalgic pre-virtual twentieth century. By shocking audiences with a bombardment of web-based imagery, the magazine amplifies the prominence of digital technology in everyday Post-Internet life and distorts the idea that the web is something restricted to the screen of a communicative device. Ryan Trecartin believes that *DIS* is 'a live, functioning embodiment of the shifting [Post-Internet] mentalities that are making today's world expansively complex' (Trecartin, quoted in Duncan, August 2012), and it has become a central hub for artists and musicians interested in similar themes. Interviews conducted for this thesis with musicians highlighted a multiplicity of differing relationships to the e-zine (with some interviewees such as Jesse Kanda electing not to align their work with it), but there was unanimous acceptance of its wider cultural importance. Lotic regards it as 'an important vehicle or vessel' for current issues (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014). ADR (quoted earlier) and Trecartin were full of praise for the magazine, which is indicative of their own close relationships with its originators. Interestingly, Holly Herndon and Evian Christ both had criticisms of the magazine, warning against the increasing tendency to 'revel' in the 'artifice and vapidness' inspired by its aesthetics (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014) and the fact that its creators seem to be

¹¹⁰ See Section Seven.

‘privileged art school kids’ (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015).¹¹¹ However, they both went on to acknowledge its significance for their work and art more generally. The magazine’s attempt to examine the impact on identity that is a result of Post-Internet culture can be seen in many musicians whose work exhibits similar themes.^x

It is important to note that the innovations of *DIS*, and the magazine’s celebration of web-based imagery, are often compelled by scepticism and irony. The aesthetics employed throughout *DIS* are often comprised of kitsch pastiche. The *Hooper Place* docu-soap (2010-2012), for example, is a central artwork that tells the story of *DIS*’ inception through a surreal combination of melodramatic non-sequiturs, digital animation and hyper-real post-production. It is a parody of soap operas and reality television that does not hide its mockery of these popular formats. Aside from the labels mentioned earlier, much of the fashion promoted on the site appears to be selected purely for its tongue-in-cheek nature.¹¹² These elements have resulted in widespread suggestions that the magazine does not take the notion of the Post-Internet seriously, and that it is more interested in exhibiting humorous artworks that do not examine contemporary cultural experience sensitively enough. This has subsequently led to a frequent rejection of the term ‘Post-Internet’. Many interviewees expressed scepticism toward the concept due to its association with the perceived insincerity of *DIS*. For example, Jesse Kanda explained that ‘for a long time I thought that aesthetic was a little too ironic for me. [...] It’s more of a thing that I’m aware of and watch from afar than something I want to be a part of’ (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014). I have already noted the misgivings conveyed by Holly Herndon and Evian Christ about the kitsch nature of the e-zine. Even Fatima Al Qadiri, a frequent *DIS* contributor, said that she finds ‘that Post-Internet phrase very problematic’ due to its growing associations with the pastiche-based sounds of

¹¹¹ These are themes that are problematised in Section Five.

¹¹² See, for example, juxtapositions of wilfully bizarre items such as chainmail, converted furniture or functional nipple-clamps with affordable high-street clothing.

DIS-affiliated record label PC Music (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014).¹¹³ It is for this reason that, as stated in the introduction, I wish to reposition the term away from its problematic associations with insincerity. As this section has made clear, the concept of the Post-Internet was not coined to describe artworks that promote a tongue-in-cheek relationship to digital spaces. In fact, as Archey and Peckham's manifesto suggests, it was born of an entirely 'sincere' attempt to engage with the experiences of a generation intimately interconnected with the virtual culture that surrounds it. Instead of employing ironic distanced aesthetics that present the web as a phenomenon that is separate from the physical world (a theme critiqued by Jurgenson, 2012; 2014), the most incisive Post-Internet art closely explores the identity politics and impact of Generation Z's cyborgian relationship with digital technologies.¹¹⁴ Much of the output of *DIS* succeeds in achieving this, and indeed their more ironic work remains worthy of exposure. As is noted in Chapter Three, there remains an appreciation for this critical and ironic style due to its self-conscious critique of the problematic ubiquity of corporate branding online. Unfortunately, however, the term 'Post-Internet' has become somewhat marred due to exaggerated associations with insincerity. As I outline in Chapter Two, there remains acceptance of concepts such as authenticity in digital music culture, and this is in part due to the experiences of Post-Internet audiences and a conviction that the impact of the physical/digital collapse that is an everyday part of their lives should be explored in music that is truly of the 'now'. The majority of the musicians that I analyse throughout this thesis resonate fully with the original, 'sincere' definition of the notion of the Post-Internet, whether they accept the label or not. They have all grown up with digital material as an omnipresent aspect of their lives, and (as quoted earlier) their work self-consciously considers

¹¹³ This is the focus of Section Five.

¹¹⁴ See Chapter Four.

issues related to Internet policy, mass clandestine surveillance and data mining, the physicality of the network, the posthuman body, radicalized information dispersion, and the open source movement. It looks at changes taking place in the age of the ubiquitous Internet, from information dispersion and artwork documentation to human language and approaches to art history (Archev and Peckham, 2014, pp. 8-9)

As is analysed in the latter half of this thesis, musicians such as Arca, Holly Herndon and Mykki Blanco¹¹⁵ are profoundly Post-Internet in their sound, visual style and self-representation. They repeatedly explore ‘the posthuman body’, ‘mass clandestine surveillance’ and the role of information noise and the virtual plaza deliberately and self-consciously. Yet despite exhibiting these concepts most of these musicians regard themselves as resolutely ‘sincere’ and honest.¹¹⁶ They do not take an ironic/distanced stance or mock virtual reality through the use of kitsch and clichéd imagery, and have thus rejected the term ‘Post-Internet’ due to its associations with these themes. Trecartin, Al Qadiri and Arca all displayed distaste for the term in interviews conducted for this thesis (although figures such as Evian Christ, Finn Diesel and Herndon were far more comfortable with it) due to an apparent belief that it suggested insincerity and aesthetic plasticity. However, regardless of the frequent rejection of the notion of the Post-Internet, I use the term extensively throughout this thesis to describe and examine their work. This is a conscious decision that was taken despite the protestations of these sceptical interviewees. My work does not apply the term to belittle the supposed sincerity or sensitivity of their music. On the contrary: I argue that their creative work, in invoking the Post-Internet context, provides an authentic representation of the ‘cultural experience’ of life in a hyper-digital world. As noted in the introduction, it is important to stress that Post-Internet music is not utilised here as a genre term. There is no attempt to infer that the output of, for example, Arca or Total Freedom is aesthetically analogous to that of #HDBOYZ or Death Grips. Rather, this is a strand of contemporary music making that is connected through its open and critical engagement with the themes and

¹¹⁵ Each of these artists is analysed in depth throughout this thesis.

¹¹⁶ These notions are, of course, problematised in this thesis, notably with reference to authenticity in the next chapter.

trends of its wider context, and in the post-millennial era there is no more useful term to describe this context than that of the Post-Internet.

In concluding this section, I reiterate the importance of the notion of the Post-Internet for music and contemporary culture. While it has, mistakenly, become a concept widely associated with irony and pastiche,¹¹⁷ the original idea of the Post-Internet condition is one that I regard as critical for examinations of contemporary musical milieux. It is a useful tool for understanding the difference between those that criticise post-millennial music culture for its apparent information overload and creative stasis, and those that are capable of comprehending these vast quantities of cultural material and navigating their way through the archives and communicative systems of a virtual realm that is inseparable from their physical lives. As becomes clearer throughout the thesis, the Post-Internet generation accepts the web as an everyday aspect of their lives and has never known existence without hyper-interconnectivity. As such, an exploration and representation of this relationship with digital technology provides an authentic vision of contemporary ‘cultural experience’. The web is a key part of the lives of Generation Z, and the musicians analysed here negotiate with it in a way that highlights its impact on the lives and identities of its users.¹¹⁸ Chapter Two provides a full overview of the concept of authenticity in popular music studies prior to the musical analysis of later chapters, demonstrating the continuing significance of authenticity in the Post-Internet popular musical milieu.

¹¹⁷ This is critiqued further in Chapter Three.

¹¹⁸ Section Four investigates these ideas more generally, placing them in the contexts of distribution and self-curation, while later sections focus on the ways in which many of these Post-Internet ideas and aesthetics permeate the sonic, visual and representational work of multiple online musicians.

CHAPTER TWO: *Musical authenticity online*

Chapter 2 – Section 3: Authenticity: theoretical perspectives

[To be considered authentic] artists must speak the truth of their (and others') situations. [The singer's] fundamental role was to represent the culture from which he comes (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, pp. 164–165)

The concept of 'authenticity' has been a major concern of popular music studies for the past thirty years (Frith, 1996; Middleton, 1990; Toynbee, 2000) and its dominance is underlined by Allan Moore's claim that it is the most 'loaded [...] value term employed in music discourse' (Moore, 2002, p. 209). It has informed the work of academics, as well as 'fan and journalistic writing' (ibid), and is a term preoccupied with exploring 'traditional criteria of what is good and what is not' (Frith, 1996, p. 35). Both academia and the media have frequently invoked and valorised the concept, endorsing artistic aspirations for authenticity whether toward the self, social experience or aesthetic style. As Richard Middleton has argued, popular music culture has historically valued those figures that represent (what is perceived to be) the 'truth of cultural experience' (Middleton, 1990, p. 127), while artists seen to place less importance on this approach are often deemed 'inauthentic'. Authenticating discourses are predicated on taste distinctions between that which is considered culturally 'good' or 'bad', but academics have stressed its malleable and chameleonic nature (Frith, 1996; Moore, 2002). The question of whether an artist, recording, live performance or piece of music is 'authentic' or not is dependent on context (cultural, spatial and temporal), the views of the consumer and media representation. Moore suggests that "authenticity" is a matter of interpretation that is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed. The question of whether a performance is authentic, then, depends on who "we" are' (Moore, 2002, p. 210). Despite the term's contentious and unstable nature, it has gained a central position in academic and fan-based discussions of a concept that unites all authenticating discourses: musical integrity. Whether embodying the pastoral 'purity' (Middleton, 1990, p. 140) of folk culture or the

amplified sphere of post-1960s guitar-based rock, authentic musicians must be seen to portray a specific cultural realism, convincingly and ‘sincerely’ addressing and characterising the social experiences that they claim to represent. Here I assess various invocations of the concept of authenticity in popular music studies, drawing on Frith (1996), Middleton (1990), Keightley (2001), Moore (2002) and Thornton (1995), and conclude with the suggestion that, in contrast to the pessimistic account of contemporary music that informs texts such as *Retromania*, the notion of authenticity remains critical for the Post-Internet musical milieu. This analysis provides a platform in traditional popular music studies that is employed throughout the thesis. Although not all of the selected definitions of authenticity are wholly related to the analysis of later chapters, it is necessary to offer this survey of the term to illuminate its crucial nature historically and contemporaneously. However, certain issues that are raised here (such as the importance of identity/representation to authenticity debates, the communal elements of authenticating discourses, and the crucial nature of invoking ‘cultural experience’) are critical to the thesis.

Authenticity as a concept has ignited debate across cultural and media studies more widely, and much of the discourse surrounding it is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is however crucial, for the purposes of this study, to focus on historical academic analyses of authenticity within popular music. Key popular music theorists Middleton (1990) and Frith (1996) qualified many of the themes that dominate authenticity debates in music, primarily illuminating traditional, romantic definitions of authenticity within styles such as folk, rock and jazz. While there are ideological discrepancies between and within these genres, the basic concepts that are introduced can be applied generally to each of their definitions of the ‘authentic’ musician. The first of these authenticating traits is the previously mentioned ‘truth of cultural experience’ (Middleton, 1990, p. 127), which can be located within an artist’s self-representation and is central to the arguments outlined in this thesis. Middleton’s pithy phrase

provides the framework for highlighting continuing belief in, and aspirations toward, authenticity in the Post-Internet musical milieu. Effectively, musicians within genres such as folk, rock and jazz are expected to embody and symbolise the culture that spawned them (ibid). This is generally considered, in these musical styles at least, to be a romanticised marginal (whether through race, class or social rebellion) background of innocent pastoralism (folk), aggressive masculinity (rock) or ghettoised African-American culture (jazz). This ultimately leads to the popular image of a folk/rock musician as a working-class ‘every-man’ (and it is predominantly heterosexual men that have been the subject of academic discussion of these genres, as is examined below) who, despite managing to find success within the mainstream music industry, remains loyal to his underclass and countercultural roots and signifies them through his actions and identity. This representational system sets up multiple binary oppositions of ‘authentic versus inauthentic’ within each genre, leading the audience and media to formulate value judgments by marking

out the genuine from the counterfeit, the honest from the false, the original from the copy, roots from surface, [...] feeling as against pretence, acoustic as against electric, subculture as against mainstream, people as against industry (Middleton, 2006, p. 200)

These binaries are most clearly seen through the personas and actions of the artists themselves. In folk, for example, the musician is expected to remain faithful to the stoic doctrines that have defined the genre. Early 1960s Bob Dylan, before he elected to ‘go electric’ (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, p. 113), is a useful case study. Folk music had historically eschewed electrical instrumentation, and Dylan’s early image evidenced this ethos. He would perform using only an acoustic guitar and harmonica, emphasising his association with the pastoral sounds of folk culture.¹¹⁹ The instrumentation selected by Dylan

¹¹⁹ It is worth noting that the issue of his electric microphone was often overlooked, due in part to what Gilbert and Pearson refer to as a hierarchy of instrumental ‘visibility’ in popular music (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, p. 112). The microphone is regarded as a tool through which Dylan’s lyrics can be projected, offering a literal (albeit amplified) replication of his voice. It does not synthetically produce sounds, as electric instrumentation (or, indeed, vocal effects) would, and is thus rendered ‘invisible’ to his audience (ibid).

authenticated him due to its association with folk cultures more widely. The solo nature of his performances also amplifies his pastoral roots. Not only does he locate himself within the mythical history of the lone singer-songwriter;¹²⁰ he is also able to promote an intimate relationship with the audience, thus bringing into focus folk traditions of collaborative music making.¹²¹ Indeed, Dylan's initial relationship with folk ideology was fractured at the Newport Music Festival in 1965 when he elected to perform with an electric guitar and backing band. He was seen to be 'betraying the premiere dictum of folk ideology' (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, p. 113) by performing with an instrument that was, at that stage, considered to be symbolic of mainstream rock and popular music. This is, of course, a highly contextual reaction. Within rock-based authenticity, for example, electric instrumentation is considered the norm and represents an alternative form of counterculture. Similarly, as I suggest throughout this thesis, Post-Internet ideas of authenticity stem from musicians that are seen to be exploring the production, self-representational and distribution methods of the Internet while simultaneously addressing the impact that the ubiquity of digital technologies has on contemporary identity politics. Attempts to move toward, for example, the nostalgic aesthetics outlined in Section One do not provide an 'authentic' image of the Post-Internet milieu. Effectively, one significant form of authenticity in post-millennial musical milieux is related to a perceived 'honest' representation of Post-Internet 'cultural experience' in an artist's output.

Lyricism is another key component of traditional popular musical authenticity. Popular music culture's foregrounding of lyrical authenticity links it with a predominantly British and North American history of socially-aware poetry and literature from both the Romantic and Modernist periods, just as its westernised background connects its concepts of compositional integrity and virtuosity to the European classical and folk music canons. To

¹²⁰ The 'singer-songwriter' concept stretches throughout rock and folk music, with its title emphasising the need for an artist to be the author of their own work as opposed to a packaged construction of the music industry.

¹²¹ See the discussion of romantic authenticity below.

briefly return to Dylan, whose lyrics have become canonised within popular music (Ricks, 2003; Corcoran, 2003), it is worth noting that his words are considered virtuosic within folk music in particular due to their adherence to the traits of the bohemian counterculture. By aligning himself with Allen Ginsberg and the Beatnik poets,¹²² Dylan enhances his image as a literary poet rather than simply a singer. This self-consciously allows him to differentiate his work from that of a mainstream pop artist, whose lyrics (often penned by writers other than the performer) might be considered less authentic by comparison. Audiences are ‘highly suspicious of those singers and musicians who are not also “authors”, involved in the composition of words and music’ (Keightley, 2001, p. 134). Authenticity is also often seen in the virtuosity of many rock and jazz instrumentalists. Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton and many others have been praised for their virtuosic skills, which often hark back to more traditional music within their style (early jazz, blues, etc.). Auslander refers to The Monkees as a historical example of an artist deemed inauthentic because of their supposed inferior musicianship, as they were regarded as an industry-generated group that, fans of authentic rock would argue, could not play their instruments in the same expressive way that ‘true’ musicians such as Hendrix and others could (Auslander, 1999, pp. 92-93). Of course, these discourses regarding lyrics and musicianship have persisted for many generations, varying depending on context and musical style. Frith notes the negative reaction that he receives from rock fans when he declares his admiration for The Pet Shop Boys, whose ‘disco’ sound results in ‘dismissal’ from those that regard synthesizers and ‘thin lead voice[s]’ as inauthentic (Frith, 1996, p. 6). Similarly, grunge fans were critical of 1990s electronica and rave musicians, due to their reliance on digital instrumentation rather than that of traditional rock iconography, and contemporary rock and metal groups¹²³

¹²² See the Ginsberg-featuring video for ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ from the documentary *Don’t Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967).

¹²³ These styles are traditionally associated with the margins and rebellion against mainstream music culture.

align themselves in opposition to so-called mainstream ‘bubblegum’ music¹²⁴ produced in reality television shows such as *The X-Factor*.¹²⁵ Although there is often a distaste for ‘bubblegum’ music and the mainstream in subcultures that deem themselves authentic, the audience justifies any mainstream success for their ‘authentic’ idols ‘as a validation of artistic quality’ (Keightley, 2001, p. 132). The mass acceptance of supposedly superior musicians vindicates ‘their own, individual, superior taste’ and reveals the potential to usurp the ‘inauthentic’ musicians that traditionally dominate the mainstream (ibid). Gilbert and Pearson complicate these ideas of authenticity and musicianship, not least through the concept of instrumental ‘visibility’ (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, p. 112). Within styles such as rock and folk there is a clear focus on the *musician* rather than the instruments themselves. The suggestion is that the authentic artist is so talented that the instrument becomes little more than a means through which their expressive abilities can be evinced (ibid). Instruments exist as mediums for the musician, not as tools of their trade. This is why guitar-based styles such as rock and folk have traditionally been suspicious of ‘inauthentic’ electronic styles such as synth-pop and club music. The electronic instrumentation of these genres is not ‘invisible’, and is indeed often foregrounded¹²⁶ because of the processed nature of its sound. According to Gilbert and Pearson, these semi-automated instruments – equated with studio recording techniques, vocal enhancement and sampling – are seen to be ‘playing’ themselves and are therefore apparently less ‘authentic’ than instruments with a more established grounding in discourses of virtuosity (ibid). Of course, this is highly problematic: electric guitars, keyboards, etc. also utilise electronic ‘enhancement’ techniques (as do live vocals), and much

¹²⁴ This is a problematic and derogatory term that has come to suggest industry-manufactured inauthenticity.

¹²⁵ Indeed, these splits and factions even break out into sub-genres and micro-scenes, exemplified in the fact that many underground club cultures (including musicians and labels in Section Nine) regard EDM (a dominant form of dance music production from the USA that exaggerates elements of other club styles in order to market them to the ‘rock festival’ audience) as intrinsically inauthentic due to its structural simplicity and emphasis on loudness-over-complexity. This can also be noted in the confrontations of fans of different styles of extreme metal.

¹²⁶ This can be seen in rave music, or the synth-driven compositions of Kraftwerk.

digital musical production exhibits significant skill and expertise. Yet guitars, drums, vocals, saxophones and other key instruments in rock, jazz and folk have achieved a degree of ‘invisibility’ that has yet to be fully afforded to ‘newer’ musical devices.

Much of the authenticity in rock has been connected to the masculinity of its stars (among other things), as in the rebellion of a young Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, the gender explorations of David Bowie (albeit in a different, more modernist mode of authenticity), or the angst-ridden male images of Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain. Moore’s claim that authenticity is culturally ascribed and dependent on context is evidenced here through the differences between these artists’ visceral sexualised rock stardom and Dylan’s more literary folk pastoralism. However, there is a significant absence of representation of female or non-masculine figures in academic authenticity debates. The artists mentioned above all represent an authentically ‘masculine’ sexuality (predominantly of the blue-collar working class/underclass variety), or a subversively anti-masculine (as in the case of Bowie) attempt to problematise rock music’s endorsement of machismo. Yet there are clear examples of conventionally ‘authentic’ women within popular music’s various styles (as investigated extensively in the work of academics such as Sheila Whiteley [2000]), despite their relative marginalisation within the popular musical histories mentioned in Section One. It is indicative of the masculinisation of the history of popular music (and rock more specifically) that women have not been granted the same role within debates about authenticity. Indeed, women hold important and popular positions within styles as diverse as pop,¹²⁷ soul,¹²⁸ punk and post-punk,¹²⁹ grunge,¹³⁰ dubstep and techno,¹³¹ footwork,¹³² hip-hop¹³³ and the electronic

¹²⁷ E.g. Kate Bush, Dusty Springfield and Madonna.

¹²⁸ E.g. Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone.

¹²⁹ E.g. Patti Smith, Kim Gordon, Lydia Lunch and Jarboe.

¹³⁰ E.g. Courtney Love and L7.

¹³¹ E.g. Ikonika, Cooly G and Laurel Halo.

¹³² E.g. Jlin.

¹³³ E.g. Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, Junglepussy and Tink.

avant-garde,¹³⁴ yet their role as signifiers of authenticity has been largely overlooked. This is because authenticating discourses have largely revolved around rock as a style, and its previously referenced foregrounding image of the *male* star.¹³⁵ It is interesting that writers and audiences are far more likely to acknowledge authentic women within styles such as R&B, disco and soul: genres that have frequently been associated with traditionally ‘feminine’ activities such as dancing.¹³⁶ I argue in Chapter Four that the role of gender, including the often marginalised and objectified role of women and sexual minority groups in popular music, has been illuminated in a Post-Internet culture preoccupied with queer and posthuman identity politics. Many musicians that have attained a reputation for authentic explorations of the Post-Internet milieu are women or identify as LGBTQ.¹³⁷ I introduce the term ‘digital queer’ in Section Seven to describe the mutability of gender online. A self-conscious expression of the posthuman concepts afforded by Post-Internet culture has enabled deep and personal explorations of the complex roles that sexuality and gender play in generating authentic representations of Post-Internet identity.

Frith and Middleton’s work offers a useful account of the concept of authenticity, but it also provides insight into the term’s contradictions. For an idea that is intended to represent ‘unchanging musical “truth”’ (Frith, 1996, p. 40), its specificities (according to context) are largely fluid and constantly in flux. Once the concept of authenticity associated with an artist, culture or sound becomes recognisable or clichéd, the definition begins to change and subsequently becomes attached to another as-yet-uncompromised signifier. The traits that comprise someone or something’s authenticity are shrouded and understood only by the select few that are capable of embodying them. Take, for example, British rave culture in the

¹³⁴ E.g. Delia Derbyshire, Laurie Anderson and Yoko Ono.

¹³⁵ Femininity has instead generally been associated with the synthetic and ‘inauthentic’.

¹³⁶ See, for instance, Reynolds, 1992-2013.

¹³⁷ See, for instance, Laurel Halo, Venus X, FKA twigs, Kelela, Grimes, Lauren Devine, Inga Copeland, GFOTY, Hannah Diamond, Fatima Al Qadiri and Holly Herndon.

late 1980s and early 1990s.¹³⁸ An ‘outsider’ culture whose authenticity was predicated on its subcultural character, its oppositional status was founded on the notion that its sounds were separate from those of the mainstream. Rave’s many scenes grew and morphed rapidly, with new forms of music, imagery and sound emerging far more frequently than in most other popular musical styles (Reynolds, 1998). Although there are many cultural and aesthetic reasons for these changes, one of the key factors was the tendency for hardcore ravers to consistently gravitate toward a sound that had yet to become absorbed into the mainstream to maintain the integrity of an authentic subculture. This resulted in the mid-1990s shift toward more extreme (and thus less likely to be compromised) styles such as gabber¹³⁹ and darkcore.¹⁴⁰ It is perhaps ironic that the term ‘authenticity’, which suggests solidarity with a certain cultural community (as well as to the self or to a musical style), not only differs and changes depending on its genre-context, but also within genres themselves. Indeed, Keightley argues that interpretations of authenticity are subjective, and that ‘what we feel to be “really rock” might be “authentic rock” for us, but not necessarily for everybody, nor for all time’ (Keightley, 2001, p. 131). He suggests that authenticity can change depending on innumerable factors, because ‘what we might have felt was authentic in our early teens we may now reject as inauthentic; conversely, music we may have deemed “inauthentic” at the time [...] may now, in retrospect, feel truly authentic’ (ibid).

Another issue worthy of note that is identified in the work of Middleton and Frith is the fact that, regardless of the differences between each critical reading of authenticity, the public persona of every artist has been carefully and deliberately built around the concept of purity and a constructed image that represents the ‘truth of cultural experience’. Authenticity, despite its aspirations toward notions of honesty and the real, is actually a mediated

¹³⁸ This is documented in Simon Reynolds’ *Energy Flash* (2013).

¹³⁹ Gabber is a form of hard dance music that originated in the Netherlands.

¹⁴⁰ Darkcore was a reaction to the increasing mainstream acceptance of happy hardcore, which had previously been regarded as an authentic and subcultural dance music culture.

performance of authentic experience. Stella Bruzzi argues that throughout the documentary *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967) Dylan never 'drops his guard for the camera or stops performing' (Bruzzi, 2000, p. 91). He is portrayed as a folk artist who has not lost touch with his roots, and yet he is *constructing* an image of himself that is designed to emphasise this. The inconsistency here could be deemed problematic. If what is 'good' in any strand of popular music is delineated by its grounding in the 'real', then the synthetic and premeditated nature of this 'reality' destabilises the value system that has been built on it. Rock musicians have utilised every means possible – including live performance, music video, documentary, interviews, etc. – to justify their reputation for authenticity. Regardless of the aesthetic differences between The Monkees and Jimi Hendrix, they are effectively differentiated primarily through Hendrix's choice to perform typical authentic traits, in comparison with The Monkees' election (whether by self-conscious choice or not) not to do so. Authenticity as 'truth', then, is something of a falsehood. This contradiction has provoked extensive debate on the subject of authenticity and has been a major factor in it becoming such a key topic. The Post-Internet themes that motivate musicians in this thesis are generally selected and presented highly self-reflexively, with musicians such as Holly Herndon, ADR, SOPHIE and Jam City all acknowledging in interviews conducted for this thesis that their engagement with digital aesthetics and motifs is conscious and deliberate. They are *performing* an authentic image of Post-Internet identity and 'cultural experience'. That does not, however, make that image inauthentic or dishonest. I would argue instead that by evincing these contextual elements, no matter how premeditatedly, they are actually showing a personal willingness toward engaging with the experiences and identity politics that impact on their audiences. These artists generate 'a critique, [...] a celebration and an extension' of 'the spirit of the Internet' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015) that, calculated or not, still seeks to highlight in a sincere and intimate manner 'the specific emotional and geopolitical terrain of the present

context in which it's created' (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). Post-Internet audiences are not deceived into believing that these artists are anything other than self-conscious performers with carefully mediated public personas, but they nonetheless appreciate the explorations of their cultural experiences and their continuing connections to the online milieu that birthed them.

Keir Keightley (2001) argues that there are two key strands of authenticity in rock culture: the traditional romantic definition outlined by Frith and Middleton, and a modernist style that has become more prominent since the 1970s. As he explains, romantic authenticity values 'traditional, rural communities, where life could be lived close to nature, and where people's labour was an integral part of their identity' (Keightley, 2001, p. 135). It is built on personal 'self-discovery and fulfilment, through the direct expression of [the artist's] innermost thoughts and emotions' (ibid). Romantic authenticity, then, refers in part to concepts such as countercultural pastoralism and literary genius. Emphasising communal collectivism, it is most clearly found in genres such as folk, where admiration for traditional instrumentation, rural cultural existence and socialist politics dominates. Its history lies within the same literary and poetic backgrounds mentioned in relation to Dylan, with the cultural Romantic period beginning in the late-eighteenth century. The modernist style, in contrast, is considered 'more overly contestatory' than its romantic counterpart, with the original modernist period of the early- to mid-twentieth century 'embrac[ing] the chaos of the city and the aesthetic possibilities of the machine' (Keightley, 2001, pp. 135-136). Rather than emphasising an artist's pastoralism and relationship with an audience, modernism draws its authentication from radical aesthetic experimentation, shock value and 'artistic integrity' (Keightley, 2001, p. 136). Modernist art attempted to replicate the rise of technologies such as electricity, film and combustion-powered transport in the early-twentieth century. Popular musical purveyors of this form of authenticity mirror these advances, drawing on the most

progressive technology or imagery of their era¹⁴¹ to offer an ‘authentic’ musical image of modern society. Modernist authenticity maintains a similar belief in originality to that of romantic authenticity. However, instead of building on communal traditions, it amplifies technology and shock to undermine the contextual conservatisms of mainstream culture. This split generates a duality within discussions of rock authenticity, which in turn further emphasises the contextual nature of authentic definition. Modernism and romanticism in rock may both be anti-mainstream in orientation, but many of their defining characteristics set them in direct opposition with one another. As Keightley further explains, ‘many rock fans will reject those performers or genres who highlight modernist authenticity as being somehow “artificial”, while other fans might dismiss romantic rock as being simplistic or compromised by its populism’ (Keightley, 2001, p. 137). He contrasts 1990s Britpop groups Oasis and Blur, both having been previously defined as authentic by their respective fan-bases. Oasis have, at face value, been deemed to be romantically authentic because of their reliance on ‘live performance, direct expression’ and working-class masculinity (ibid). Blur, in contrast, experiment with many different styles of pop music and ‘foreground synthesizers and the recording studio’ (ibid). These apparently juxtaposed aesthetic choices have rendered them authentic to their own audience, but inauthentic to oppositional fans. However, as Keightley latterly explains, each of these groups contradictorily engages with both forms of authenticity. Blur are influenced heavily by traditional blues-esque guitar playing, while Oasis use the post-production techniques of the recording studio as much as any modernist group. This unveils yet another contradiction in the authenticity debate: romanticism and modernism are not necessarily completely separate entities.¹⁴² Keightley suggests that those

¹⁴¹ Examples include punk’s costuming, the Ballard and Burroughs-inspired dystopian lyrics of Joy Division, Kraftwerk’s use of synthesisers, Throbbing Gristle’s industrial sounds, Sun City Girls’ bricolage of transnational sources, the mutable mixes of 1990s rave, etc.

¹⁴² Keightley uses examples such as punk musicians (whose romantic ‘back-to-basics’ music style contrasts with their modernist visual aesthetic) and The Smiths (who combine their playful sexuality and experimental lyricism

artists deemed most innovative in rock's history have deliberately sought to combine both forms of authenticity, further indicating that authenticating discourses are fluid and changeable. A modernist consideration of the impact of the most current technologies alongside a romantic faith in communal musical milieux are both located in the work of authentically Post-Internet musicians, as is emphasised throughout the later chapters of this thesis.

This combination of modernist and romantic authenticity is found in the work of electronic musicians during the British rave era in the early 1990s, and Sarah Thornton (1995) offers an overview of the system of 'subcultural capital' that informed this musical and social scene (Thornton, 1995, p. 11). Subcultural capital refers less to authorial authenticity, and more to the overall 'coolness' of audiences within a particular musical scene (Thornton, 1995, p. 12). It is an '*objectified or embodied*' form of authenticity that involves the use of slang, the understanding and appropriation of current fashion trends and a deep knowledge of, in this example, the history and world of dance music (Thornton, 1995, p. 11). If a subcultural scene becomes fractured through a mainstream absorption of its styles and sounds, then its proponents apply authenticating notions to a new, untainted alternative subculture.¹⁴³ Thornton argues that youth subcultures feature their own ideologies of 'capital' and 'worth'. She suggests that this is a theme that occurs across younger social circles but is most frequently connected to music, as 'youth leisure and identity often revolve around' the current trends in popular music (Thornton, 1995, p. 19). 1990s club culture signalled a shift away from authorial authenticity in much British music culture at the time,¹⁴⁴ and toward a focus on the audience itself. On one level, club music emulates authenticating traits reminiscent of modernist art. The use of new technologies such as sampling and synthesizers,

with their guitar-based virtuosity, associated with 'romantic' rock) to emphasise this further (Keightley, 2001, p. 138-139).

¹⁴³ See the above-mentioned case of hardcore rave music.

¹⁴⁴ However, it could be argued that the conservatism of Britpop sought to re-establish traditional authorial doctrines.

the focus on theatricality and event, and the experimental nature of the music itself are all certainly modernist traits. However, the communal aspect of 1980s and 1990s rave is heavily linked to the ideologies of romantic authenticity that place value on collectivist art and music. In dance music, there is generally no vocalist to provide authorial identification or an authenticating identity.¹⁴⁵ This moves the music closer to a romanticised utopia of communal equality between creator and consumer, promoting a carnival-esque (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 21) expressive environment for an ‘eternal youth’ culture that felt alienated and disenfranchised by the 1980s/1990s British class system (Thornton, 1995, p. 56). The political critique of rock and folk music is, theoretically at least, removed with the elimination of vocals and lyrics. Hillegonda Rietveld describes rave as something more than just ‘an ephemeral cultural event that was experienced through the movements of the body, its sexuality and its emotional reserves’ (Rietveld, 1998, p. 20). Such events seemed to offer romantic hope for a youth disillusioned by capitalism and conservatism. They provided freedom through a new folk-like authenticity built on dance, recreational drugs and social experience: a reclaiming of the personal body from the oppressive ‘Body Politic’ of British society (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 21). By combining a modernist musical aesthetic with a romantic approach to communal music appreciation, British youth of the time achieved its own form of neo-romantic subcultural capital. Moving beyond the politics that had governed previous notions of authenticity, such as the ‘honesty’ of a musician’s background, aesthetic integrity or social awareness, rave’s authenticity relied on dissolution of the self through total submission to dancing, drugs and communal pleasure. Club subcultures encouraged youthful rebellion (through rejection of post-Thatcherite capitalist individualism and over-exposure to mind-altering experiences) by providing a utopian (if simulated) escape from the daily existence of work or, in many cases, unemployment. This is perhaps the ultimate example of romantic and modernist authenticities

¹⁴⁵ The emergence of garage and grime in the early-2000s would ultimately begin to reshape this theme.

operating in conjunction to engender a post-authorial ideology of authenticity. These trends have consequently become a critical element of online authenticity debates, and have informed the work of many of the artists considered throughout this thesis.¹⁴⁶

Moore (2002) provides a nuanced view of the mutable nature of authenticity. He begins by quoting Born and Hesmondhalgh's assertion that since the turn of the millennium (in an era of retromania and information overload) the concept of authenticity 'has been consigned to the intellectual dust-heap' (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 30) by academics. They argue – in terms that echo those illuminated in Section One – that appropriation and sampling have become so entrenched within post-millennial musical culture that originality (and by extension authenticity) is no longer a feasible yardstick by which value can be measured. However, I argue that authenticity still exists as a concept within journalistic and fan-based discourses today, particularly through its relationship to musicians that explore their surrounding Post-Internet context. Moore counters recent academic dismissal of the term by offering three reasons for the continuing relevance of authenticating ideas:

The first is that to identify the authentic with the original is only one understanding which is currently made, an understanding which should not be allowed to annexe the whole. The second is that in one sense, appropriation [...] remains foundational to processes of authentication. The third is that the social alienation produced under modernity, which appears to me the ideological root of such striving for the authentic, and of which we have been aware for decades, grows daily more apparent (Moore, 2002, p. 210)

Moore's points here are crucial. By explaining that prior debates about authenticity have focused primarily on artists with a specific degree of originality, he seemingly contradictorily states that the notion remains relevant in an era in which appropriation and reference have become ubiquitous. His suggestion that appropriation is a key aspect of authenticating processes may disrupt the progressive canonical histories outlined by Simon Reynolds and others, but it is accurate. Artists such as Eric Clapton, Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones

¹⁴⁶ The fan-curated cultures reviewed in the next section as well as the dissolved posthuman identities in the final two chapters all retain similar notions of authenticity to those foregrounded in rave and club cultures.

are indebted to the African-American blues artists whose style is appropriated into their work; post-punk drew on many aspects of punk and krautrock in its stylistic approach; and rave culture deems acknowledgement of its past an intrinsically authentic trait. These acts and styles are considered authentic precisely *because of* their referentiality, as it indicates an engagement with historical authentic ‘cultural experiences’ and source material. This further indicates that Reynolds, Morley and Fisher’s critique of a lack of worth in contemporary music culture is founded on a problematically optimistic view of musical innovation in the twentieth century.¹⁴⁷

Moore goes on to suggest that there are three major forms of authenticity: first person, second person and third person. He explains that

‘First person authenticity’ [...] arises when an originator [...] succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance [...] represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience (Moore, 2002, p. 214)

‘Third person authenticity’ [...] arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance (Moore, 2002, p. 218)

‘Second person authenticity’ [...] occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them (Moore, 2002, p. 220)

First person authenticity, then, is linked to the ‘honesty’ argument outlined by Frith and Middleton. It is the ability of a performer, regardless of musical context, to convince their audience that they are offering an image of ‘the real’. This is the most widely accepted definition of the term. Third person authenticity is the above-mentioned relationship between The Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton and the historical ‘authentic’ styles that they draw on. This relies on both an ‘accurate’ re-presentation of these sounds, as well as a noted attempt to generate renewed innovation from the referenced work. Perhaps Moore’s most useful notion is that of second person authenticity, which suggests that the very notion of the ‘truth of

¹⁴⁷ This is an issue referred to in the previous chapter and returned to throughout the rest of this thesis.

cultural experience' varies depending on the tastes of the listeners themselves. Authenticity is not necessarily about generating novelty or creating countercultural music; rather, it is about what the audience gains personally from the performance and whether or not it speaks to their personal experiences. While first and third person authenticity are linked to both romantic and modernist ideas through their reliance on a conversation between originality and traditionalism, the idea of second person authenticity is based on Moore's suggestion that, to a certain audience, any music could be considered authentic provided it speaks to them in a certain way. He uses the example of his daughter's admiration for the conventionally corporate and 'inauthentic' mainstream pop group S Club 7,¹⁴⁸ as their music and dance moves resonate with her in a way that is intrinsically 'authentic' to the cultural experiences of the intended audience (ibid). Moore underlines this to explain that discussions of authenticity should move away from discourses of originality and authorship, instead exploring the relevance of authenticating discourses to audiences' lives. This holds particular importance for this thesis, as I suggest that many current debates about authenticity centre on the ability of Post-Internet audiences to locate resonances of, to again quote Middleton, their own 'cultural experience' in music that openly engages with digital technologies and themes of contemporary identity. Music and musicians that are deemed 'authentic' to these audiences explore the identity politics and lifestyles of a generation that maintains an intrinsic and symbiotic relationship with digital technologies.^{xi}

To conclude this section, I draw these ideas about authenticity into a brief examination of the importance of the concept to the contemporary musical milieu (or at least that strand with which I am concerned).¹⁴⁹ As I have outlined above, notions of authenticity shift depending on context and audience, and this continues to be the case in Post-Internet culture. In the first two sections of this thesis I outlined two approaches to analysing

¹⁴⁸ S Club 7 was a turn-of-the-millennium mainstream pop group whose songs were primarily aimed at a 'tween' aged audience.

¹⁴⁹ I take these issues further in the next section.

contemporary popular music – the retromanic discourse and Post-Internet theory – and these themes are intrinsically linked to authenticity debates. As explained in Section One, writers such as Reynolds, Fisher and Morley have argued that the dissolution of time/space-specific scenes has resulted in a dearth of innovation and a decline in meaningful subcultures. One of the repercussions of this is an assumption that concepts of authenticity are no longer of relevance to contemporary music practices (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 30). Instead, musicians and audiences are seen to simply (re)produce and consume artistic material in vast quantities, with little interest in whether that material is perceived to be in some way honest, novel or of cultural worth. Audiences seeking authentic music are, according to these critics, forced to look to the past to find it, as music nowadays arguably does not ‘matter’ as much as pre-Internet music did (Reynolds, 2011, p. 172). Although academics continue to debate the topic of authenticity, with key journals regularly offering renewed discussions about its mutable nature, there tends to be an avoidance of analysis of its importance in online music for this very reason.¹⁵⁰ There are many contemporary articles,¹⁵¹ but they are generally focused on themes and events from the early-2000s (before the Post-Internet era) such as the collapse of the music industry, *Napster*, the decline of music journalism and digital archival systems.¹⁵² It seems to have simply been accepted by Reynolds, Fisher, Morley and, subsequently, academic discourse that digital music is so devoid of context and so referential

¹⁵⁰ See, for instance, recent articles such as Nardi, Rietveld and Echard’s introduction to a special issue of *IASPM@Journal* regarding authenticity and performance (2014), which studies the relationship between DJing and performance without thoroughly exploring the ways that this relates to contemporary online milieu. McKinna’s article, in the same issue, is similarly preoccupied with notions of the live performance without considering online culture more widely (2014), while Ventzislavov (2012) analyses the idea of the ‘authentic’ in contemporary popular music in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* without specific reference to blogging, social media or the rise of self-curation (all analysed in the next section). Taylor and Barker’s *Faking it: The quest for authenticity in Popular Music* (2007) is arguably the most prominent example of these problems. The most recent monograph-length consideration of the concept, it focuses primarily on artists, scenes and genres from pre-2000, ultimately offering little in the way of analysis of the key role that authenticity continues to play online in favour of ruminations on the already established debate surrounding whether music needs to be considered ‘authentic’ to be deemed ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

¹⁵¹ I have referred briefly to Montano (2010), Katz (2008), Fairchild (2007) and Meier (2011) in the introduction to this thesis, while Eckstein (2009), Zagorski-Thomas (2010) and many others are referenced in Section Four due to their focus on fan-led digital milieu.

¹⁵² These issues are highlighted in the next section.

that traditional notions of authenticity are either no longer of interest to (or are simply not present in the contemporaneous music of) post-millennial audiences. Indeed, the ironic approach that often marks the Post-Internet *DIS Magazine* aesthetic seems to emphasise this. The sounds of the magazine's associates PC Music¹⁵³ incorporate so much exaggerated humour, kitschy imagery and sonic insincerity that there appears to have been a purposeful rejection of conventional ideas of authenticity (although, as noted, the definition of authenticity is subjective and malleable, which is an issue returned to in Section Five). As noted by PC Music manager and *DIS* music editor Finn Diesel, authenticity debates have had 'an enormous and largely harmful influence on music' (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015). It is as if many artists, disheartened by the negativity of retromanic discourse, deliberately generate music that refuses to be honest or earnest, selecting sonic vacuity or cheap thrills to satiate an audience whose focus has been eroded by information noise.¹⁵⁴

Yet my argument, and the one that is expanded on throughout the remainder of this thesis, is that Post-Internet musicians generate an authentic representation of the 'cultural experience' of living in a world defined by the blurring of the organic and the digital. This is informed by Middleton's assertion that authenticity is located in musicians that foreground the 'truth' of their – and their audiences' – 'cultural experiences', as well as Moore's notion of a personal, contextually-informed second person authenticity. I suggest that Post-Internet themes, aesthetics and identity politics resonate with many members of a generation that is intrinsically entwined with the digital technology that surrounds it. If a listener has grown up with the notion of being incapable of separating the virtual from the physical, it is possible for them to locate (second person) authenticity in the work of musicians whose sounds, images and identity experiments embrace the impact of these developments and experiences. This is in direct contrast to what Jurgenson condemns as a problematic fetishisation and

¹⁵³ See Section Five.

¹⁵⁴ See Section Two and Section Five.

celebration of ‘offline’ existence as ‘authentic’ and ‘true’ in comparison with ‘online’ spaces (Jurgenson, 2012; Jurgenson, 2014).¹⁵⁵ The musical approaches outlined in this thesis are thus intrinsically connected to notions of authenticity through self-conscious attempts to represent the ‘truth of’ Post-Internet ‘cultural experience’. The majority of the musicians considered in later sections regard themselves as ‘sincere’. They regard the Internet as, in the words of Jesse Kanda, ‘my school, my paints, and my gallery’ (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014), and thus deem the virtual realm to be inseparable from everyday existence, not something that must be viewed with scepticism or distance. As such, authenticity (in the sense of a contextually-informed aesthetic and thematic approach) appears to be crucial to online music culture, despite the negative claims that have been made about contemporary music in recent cultural discourse. Even the ‘ironic’ style of PC Music and *DIS* maintains a certain degree of authenticity, as the perceived lack of sincerity in their aesthetics does not negate audience appreciation of the artists’ genuine critical attempts to illuminate the problems of a culture dominated by the hyper-corporate virtual plaza.¹⁵⁶

The musicians interviewed for this thesis largely confirmed that they were informed by – and aspired to – particular notions of authenticity, whether in relation to their surroundings or their musical style (or both).¹⁵⁷ Considering that Frith and Middleton note that notions of authenticity are the result of carefully constructed personas and ‘performed’ versions of the ‘truth of cultural experience’, it is telling that these musicians recognise that authenticity is important for audience perception/reception. They self-consciously strive to match the image of Post-Internet existence that they believe that their audiences are seeking from them through their deliberate exhibition and exploitation of digital themes and aesthetics. The sensibilities that the interviewed musicians celebrated as authentic were

¹⁵⁵ This is considered in the previous section.

¹⁵⁶ This is analysed in Sections Two, Five and Six.

¹⁵⁷ Those that did not were talking primarily in relation to appropriation (perhaps confusing authenticity with originality) but showed an affinity for the suggestion that examining contemporary cultural experiences is critical to the continuing production of worthwhile music.

varied. SOPHIE, for instance, refuted the idea that authenticity should be equated with notions of the ‘underground’, suggesting that music is ‘only underground because it’s not good enough to be mainstream’ (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015).¹⁵⁸ Authentic music, for SOPHIE, is marked by its capacity to resonate with its audience, not because it is perceived to have emerged from a subcultural context or artist. Jesse Kanda and Arca stressed the significance that they place on notions of honesty, and claimed to reject calculation or irony (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014; Arca, thesis interview, 2015). In a similar vein, Evian Christ argued that ‘any musician [...] would probably say [that] their music was honest or authentic’, but deemed it critical ‘to be honest about your reference points’ (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015). He suggested that the Internet has engendered a great deal of music that is, in his words, ‘shallow’ and thus inauthentic, which is perhaps a reference to the oft-maligned PC Music (ibid). Indeed, these references to shallowness¹⁵⁹ dominated interviews conducted with Fatima Al Qadiri and Lotic, who respectively criticised those who ‘try to say [they] are a grime producer or [they] are a juke producer [but] have nothing to do with those scenes’ (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014); and music that ‘is so incredibly academic sounding [that it] doesn’t feel like it’s coming from a real place’ (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014). Jam City offered comparable views, claiming that ‘being honest’ and echoing one’s ‘own experience’ are critical elements of musical production that is authentic to ‘the specific emotional and geopolitical terrain of the present context in which it’s created’ (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). These issues are all returned to during the course of this thesis. The idea of authenticity clearly remains an overarching presence in the work of Post-Internet musicians. The most interesting responses in the interviews were from those musicians who asserted that Post-Internet authenticity is inherently connected to the ways in which musicians utilise the technology that surrounds them. In this context, Holly Herndon stated that making ‘best use

¹⁵⁸ This is an outlook that evokes the central themes of *DIS Magazine* explored in Section Two.

¹⁵⁹ This is noted in the previous section and in Section Five.

of the interconnectivity we have available to us' is one way of conducting one's self in an 'authentic' manner (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). Although 18+ rejected the term authenticity, their promotion of and admiration for a 'steal-and-make-better' culture of 'reblogging, or remixing, regramming' displays a similar concern with invoking the virtual spaces that they inhabit¹⁶⁰ and indicates that Reynolds' critique of digital bricolage is at odds with the thought-processes and techniques of Post-Internet artists (18+, thesis interview, 2014). As I argue throughout this thesis, Post-Internet music with a reputation for authenticity is self-consciously preoccupied with attempts to render sincere and sensitive expressions of the impact of the Post-Internet condition on ideas such as identity, communication and innovation. The overview of the contemporary musical milieu provided in the fourth section emphasises this further, as I stress the authentic character of fan-curation and expanding channels of influence in Post-Internet music.

¹⁶⁰ See the next section in particular.

Chapter 2 – Section 4: Online fan cultures and the Post-Internet milieu

Today trends break on the Internet. [...] Artists, fashion designers and musicians [are] communicating and influencing each other's aesthetics, just like the golden age of club culture. [...] Youth cultures are everywhere; *Tumblr* teens talk to like-minded individuals anywhere with Wi-Fi, they don't have to hang out on the same streets. And they no longer need their own fanzine, there are thousands of blogs filling that role (Kissick, 2015)

Having outlined the usefulness of the concept of the Post-Internet for analysing contemporary culture and reflected on it in relation to debates about authenticity, I now apply these ideas to the digital musical milieu specifically. Online media has enabled the emergence of alternative cultural spaces through which musical production, distribution and consumption becomes a fluid and mutable process. The relationship between artists, audiences and curatorial journalists has been frequently considered in previous analyses of popular music,¹⁶¹ but the fourth section of this thesis analyses the changes that web culture has introduced to previously established modes of curation and communication. What has resulted is a musical culture that is increasingly self-curated by fans, with the role of the instructive and institutionally authorised journalist diminishing. These ideas have been highlighted previously in academia and journalism¹⁶² as they are phenomena that have been developing over the course of the Internet's existence. This section draws on academic writing regarding these issues to provide a platform for the analysis of the artists that follows in later chapters and to underline the significance that authenticity retains within contemporary musical cultures. Before beginning to explore the overall context of the musical milieu, however, it is important to clarify the meaning and employment of the words 'scenes' and 'milieu' in popular music. This establishes a terminology through which I analyse and critique the changes brought about by the Post-Internet shift in music culture.

¹⁶¹ See Frith, 1996; Laing, 2006; Middleton, 1990; Jones, 1992; Jones, 2002; Shuker, 1994; Gorman, 2001; and Toynbee, 1993.

¹⁶² A few examples include Carter and Rogers, October 2014; Kot, 2009; Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 2010; and Conner and Jones, 2014.

In formulating a language through which this twenty-first century ‘milieu’ can be assessed, I draw on the work of Peter Webb (2007). Webb’s work focuses on the problematic position that ‘scenes’ hold within popular cultural writing, engaging with the work of Sara Cohen. Cohen’s concept of ‘scene’ is an ethnographic one that can be used to describe both ‘local music culture’ and, seemingly contradictorily, ‘global and mobile cultures’ (Cohen, 1999, p. 249). Essentially, in Cohen’s definition, ‘scenes’ are similar to Thornton’s ‘subcultures’. They are, in popular musical terms, ‘neo-tribal’ (Webb, 2007, p. 29) groupings of individuals, sounds and ideas that revolve around shared tastes. Drawing on Will Straw, Peter Webb emphasises the need for ‘a more fluid, cosmopolitan, transitory and geographically dispersed sense of scene’ that is not restricted by temporal or spatial boundaries (ibid). The dominant aspect of his criticism stems from the fact that the term ‘scene’ has been so over-employed that it has been rendered relatively meaningless. He explains that

Scene and neo-tribe have become interchangeable with terms like post-subculture or community and [are] quite vague and non-illuminating. [...] A term that would more fully encapsulate the dynamic, fluid, and changing nature of particular types of music making and associations with it [would] reflect the networks of interaction, production, and influence [of] music makers and actors in the particular music ‘scenes’ (ibid)

Webb acknowledges that the relationships and interactions between those with shared tastes and interests are fluid and changeable depending on context, environment and personal association with the so-called ‘scene’. He attempts to introduce and develop a concept that can encompass the mutability of musical cultures while escaping the inevitable misdirection that the word ‘scene’ generates. He elects ‘to use the term “milieu” [as] it more fully illuminates the notion of a network that has a particular density in terms of connections, relevancies, typifications, commonalities, and aesthetics’ (ibid). ‘Milieu’ is, according to Webb, more successful in grasping the complex relationship that fans, artists and sounds within these ‘scenes’ have to their overall context and environment. It encompasses and

establishes links between seemingly disparate elements that make up a musical culture, such as politics, class, race, gender and temporal/spatial context. As he further clarifies, milieu ‘articulates a set of overlapping levels of meaning, relevance, disposition and understanding [and] illuminate[s] the complex development of types of cultural activity within the stock of knowledge of an individual operating within a social grouping’ (Webb, 2007, p. 30). ‘Milieu’ is not tied to specific implications of subcultural capital in the way that ‘scene’ is, and instead is capable of emphasising the role that the overarching context plays in the development of these ‘social groupings’, as well as the relationships between one ‘scene’ and another. It is a suitably fluid term for a mutable system of musical association and interaction. By introducing such a term Webb reveals the ways in which musical cultures become part of an ‘extended milieu’, drawing on the impact that ‘global flows of people, finance, ideas, and technology’ have on the self and music more generally (Webb, 2007, p. 33). Due primarily to the rise of globalisation and digital technology, listeners are inter-connected in such a way that they are constantly exposed to multiple different ‘scenes’. Although their temporal or spatial difference may suggest that these listeners are not a direct part of these ‘scenes’ (at least in relation to the traditional employment and definition of the term), the conceptual framework of the ‘milieu’ foregrounds their complex relationship to and involvement within them.

Webb’s definition of ‘milieu’ is useful for clarifying the relationships and associations of musicians and audiences online. It allows for a flexible approach to exploring the ways in which the industry, audiences, artists and the online environment itself have shaped post-millennial music culture. The ‘milieu’ to which I refer is the Post-Internet context and condition generally. This does not mean that I discount or avoid the use of the word ‘scene’ entirely, however. I employ the term ‘milieu’ with specific reference to that with which Webb’s concept is most heavily linked: an overarching context and the relationships between

various cultures and subcultures. It is thus used to refer to the Post-Internet generation more widely to augment a study of the web's communicative channels and their impact on musical relationships, as well as the role that newly empowered audiences hold within contemporary musical discourse. 'Scene' remains a crucial term when referring to specific groups of musicians and fans, however. Although this appears to limit the fluidity somewhat by amplifying the difference between varying 'neo-tribes', I wish to maintain a clear appreciation of the relationships between these groups by employing 'scenes' as sub-categories of the overall 'milieu'. 'Scene' is such a widely-used term, even in contemporary music culture, that it is difficult to avoid its application entirely, and indeed the connotations outlined above can be useful when examining specific groups of musicians and fans. I follow Webb's critique of the simplistic exclusivity and singularity of specific 'scenes' by placing them within the context of the general milieu. The 'scene' (or aesthetic style) that is the major focus of this thesis is that of musicians and artists self-consciously engaging with the wider Post-Internet milieu (most of whom have some connection to *DIS Magazine*), as this differentiates these practitioners from the vast quantities of musical styles cohabiting online.

Subcultures have been critical to debates about musical authenticity since the emergence of popular music in the mid-twentieth century, and Thornton has documented the construction of the 'taste cultures' that define and represent an audience's musical choices (Thornton, 1995, p. 3). As explained in the previous section, authenticity is often observed in the exclusivity of these subcultures, with specific clothing, 'slang' and insider knowledge defining a fan's sense of belonging within certain groups. However, while late-twentieth century systems of subcultural capital may have been deeply embedded in fan culture, their indebtedness to the music press and the dominance of the music industry cannot be underestimated. As is highlighted throughout this section, online subcultures and communicative channels have started to disrupt the power of the music industry and press

(Leloup, 2010, pp. 158-159), enabling fans to hold a stronger curatorial position within their respective groups. This section draws on Thornton's ideas regarding subcultural capital in relation to 1990s British club culture to examine the ways in which the Post-Internet milieu has arguably empowered audiences and engendered an enduring investment in authenticity as a concept. Web-based fans are now actively involved in the exposure, marketing, reviewing and distribution processes that have long been crucial in popular music, and one perceived form of authenticity in Post-Internet music is seen in the work of musicians that are similarly indebted to the present context of 'reblogging, or remixing, regramming' (18+, thesis interview, 2014). Although the current system is far from 'homogenised', the potential to move away from anachronistic journalistic/academic 'top-down' structures of taste and curation is more substantial in the 2010s than ever before. This shift in authority is at least in part due to the fact that, as Pierre Lévy argues, 'cyberspace offers instruments for the co-operative construction of a communicative context in numerous and geographically scattered groups' (Lévy, quoted in Leloup, 2010, p. 159). The 'geographically scattered groups' referenced here are the Post-Internet audiences whose full comprehension of and connection to the distribution and communicative networks of the Internet enable them to become self-curators. Notably, the first chapter of Thornton's *Club Cultures* highlights the ways in which various subcultural groups differentiate from and identify with one another. Although it is written with reference to clubbing, her assertion that neo-tribes 'generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and [...] their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves' (Thornton, 1995, p. 3) can be applied to the majority of musical subcultures. With the rise of online media, the ways in which audiences locate and communicate with those whose tastes resemble their own have changed significantly since Thornton's 1995 monograph,¹⁶³ but the principles remain similar. Fans

¹⁶³ Those communicative methods are the focus of this section.

continue to seek out people with common interests to engage critically with, share with, and learn from. Thornton acknowledges that each scene – subcultural or not – can be identified by its own specific fan language and phenomena. In club cultures, this takes the form of ‘fashionable haircuts and well-established record collections’, as well as knowledge of slang and dance moves (Thornton, 1995, pp. 11-12). In the blogging and social media milieu of the web, capital is situated in the location and sharing of the most interesting and obscure music; the use of new programs, applications and social networks; an understanding of the latest sharing and distribution formats;¹⁶⁴ and an appreciation of the eclecticism of online music tastes.¹⁶⁵ Post-Internet web users have grown up with these elements, and they are therefore an everyday aspect of their consumption and enjoyment of musical milieux. This is one issue that limits the applicability of Thornton’s text to Post-Internet culture. Authenticity within twentieth century subcultures was heavily associated with the idea of remaining true to one’s group or scene and drawing on localised influences. Contemporary forms of online authenticity, though, are shaped by the diversity and information noise of the Internet’s atemporal and aspatial condensation of popular musical history. Where context was once critical to identification with others, it has become increasingly difficult to associate temporal or spatial context with music found in virtual environments. As such, web-based audiences locate authenticity in musicians’ enthusiasm for, knowledge of and references to multiple strands of musical styles. This is critiqued in *Retromania*, but has become an everyday part of ‘cultural experience’ for Post-Internet music audiences. In relation to musicians involved in self-consciously Post-Internet musical production, authenticity is ingrained in their symbiotic relationship to the digital culture that informs and exhibits their eclectic output.

¹⁶⁴ These include developments such as embedding videos from *YouTube*, streaming tracks via *Spotify*, torrenting large collections of music, or purchasing obscure albums from independent online marketplaces such as *Bandcamp*.

¹⁶⁵ Further explanation of the importance of these themes dominates interviews conducted for this thesis with Ryan Trecartin (2015), 18+ (2014), ADR (2015) and Finn Diesel (2015).

One key element of Thornton's analysis is her discussion of space as a central part of youth subculture. She argues that clubs and discotheques are the key spaces around which (dance) subcultures develop (Thornton, 1995, pp. 14-21). They are places of community, linked to romantic notions of authenticity as shared experience, and comprise an apparent elimination of racial, gendered and class-based segregation, as in theory all participants are connected by a similarity of interest and taste (Thornton, 1995, p. 15). Thornton convincingly asserts that clubs become 'other-worldly environments in which to escape' (Thornton, 1995, p. 21), tying her research into debates about the liberating and empowering nature of 'belonging' to a subculture. In a Post-Internet world, the web has become a new major subcultural space. As Heuman suggests, 'bloggers' negotiations of custody and property follow particular subcultural values – like the imagined "horizontal" community that collapses production and consumption, in opposition to "vertical" mass culture' (Heuman, 2013, pp. 178-179). Online subcultures are rapidly replacing nightclubs and festivals, many of which have gradually become commercialised and have subsequently lost their subcultural capital within underground music cultures.¹⁶⁶ The 'other-worldly environment' of Post-Internet existence and the ease with which one can locate those with similar tastes through blogs, forums and social networks have provided the 'escapism' that is one of the defining (and attractive) characteristics of subcultures. Jenkins, Ford and Green claim that online 'fan communities [provide] a vehicle through which people [can] share their particular perspectives with the world' in an easier and more instantaneous manner than was feasible pre-Internet (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, p. 60), revealing the straightforwardness of web-based subcultural formation. As argued in the second section, post-millennial youths' physical lives are increasingly inseparable from the virtual spaces that they also inhabit (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). The enabling of anonymity through avatars and pseudonyms, the

¹⁶⁶ See influential dubstep producer Burial's interview with Mark Fisher, December 2007.

simple ways in which users can locate those with comparable tastes to their own, and the gravitas situated in the knowledge and use of memes, web-slang and authoritative blogging/tweeting all equate to updated versions of Thornton's subcultural capital. The concepts remain the same, consistently embedded in debates about authenticity, but the spaces and phenomena differ due to the shifts brought about by digital media. Online, knowledge of the 'coolest' or most informative blogs and the latest exciting artists imparts fans with their own subcultural capital. This shift from localised subcultural spaces to more globalised virtual ones is documented in Kissick's 'Is the Internet the new street?':

The streets no longer lead to [culture's] future; today trends break on the Internet. *Tumblr* girls and *Tumblr* boys in their bedrooms are at the heart of hyper-colourful youth cultures all over the world. [...] The outstanding pop stars of our times [are] Frank Ocean [from] Odd Future's free-mixtape-and-*Tumblr* revolution [and] Grimes, an Internet-happy riot grrrl with colour-changing hair. Both of them have tumbled onto our screens, showing us their worlds through revealing, honest blogs as well as self-releasing songs for free online. [...] There's a real crossing swords of cultures on the Internet. Artists, fashion designers and musicians are forming their own friendship networks worldwide; they're constantly communicating and influencing each other's aesthetics, just like the golden age of club culture. That's not happening on the streets as much. Youth cultures are everywhere; *Tumblr* teens talk to like-minded individuals anywhere with Wi-Fi, they don't have to hang out on the same streets. And they no longer need their own fanzine, there are thousands of blogs filling that role (Kissick, 2015)

In other words, the trends and 'capital' that were once deemed to be highly exclusive phenomena belonging to specific locales are now notable for their pan-global nature. Being 'cool' and following the latest subcultural scenes in the Post-Internet milieu involves remaining up-to-date with artists whose style, aesthetics and themes are generated and developed in virtual spaces. It is no longer completely necessary to 'be there' in person;¹⁶⁷ instead, being a part of an authentic scene now involves locating and keeping up-to-date with the latest trends online. This is all, again, indicative of Jurgenson's assertion that the online and offline worlds are intrinsically inseparable (Jurgenson 2012; Jurgenson 2014). The

¹⁶⁷ This exclusive phrase implies greater subcultural capital for those with first-hand experience of a local scene.

behaviours, tastes and identities of subcultures in the ‘real world’ are completely entwined with those that develop on the Internet.

One clear manifestation of these changes is in the usurpation of traditional print periodicals as totems of subcultural knowledge by fan-generated blogs and websites, with *Pitchfork*¹⁶⁸ providing the most significant example of this. Its rise is a critical development in the establishment of these new systems of subcultural capital. In its early days it had more in common with ‘do-it-yourself’ fanzines than the mainstream music media of *Rolling Stone*, *NME* or national newspapers (Kot, 2009, p. 114). It is worth offering a brief contextual overview of these earlier systems of journalism, as the newly restructured hierarchies of music writing/reviewing are indicative of the increasing importance of fan-led musical exposure and self-curation online. The fanzines of independent musical subcultures maintained a certain form of authenticity within the small scenes that they catered for. They were defined by their difference from larger magazines, as they shed light on styles of music that were ignored or marginalised by the mainstream. Theirs was a countercultural position, romanticised like the ‘underground’ artists that they represented. This is clearly linked to the authenticating discourses outlined in the previous section. Apparently untainted by the machinations of the capitalist music industry, these fanzines were established and distributed by individuals with a deep investment in music and a supposed disinterest in any personal gain other than the enjoyment of sharing their tastes with others or displaying subcultural capital.¹⁶⁹ This serves as an example of Thornton’s notion of subcultural authenticity, as these periodicals relied on a small but dedicated following that located capital in the isolated examples of other readers with similar musical interests. Yet fanzines’ authority was limited due to their small circulation (ibid). The contrastingly expansive knowledge, wide scope and financial strength of more mainstream publications allowed them to generate far greater

¹⁶⁸ Ryan Schreiber established *Pitchfork* in 1995.

¹⁶⁹ See Kot’s overview of *Big Takeover*, 2009, pp. 115-117.

curatorial power. These magazines essentially shaped the historiography of popular music, with Laing suggesting that *NME*, *Melody Maker* and *Rolling Stone* ‘played an important part in the production and circulation of meanings, judgments and interpretations of music’ (Laing, 2006, p. 339). They offered interviews with rock, folk and pop stars; reviews of major albums; and coverage of lesser-known international music scenes. In many ways, they were the most crucial press for musical consumption in the late-twentieth century. They also represent the ultimate symbol of a ‘top-down’ system of musical classification, taste distinction and marketing. These magazines retained a sense of curatorial power through the gravitas of their writers. Music fans, prior to the emergence of the Internet, received the majority of their subcultural knowledge and musical recommendations from the curatorial journalists that wrote for and edited these magazines; it was the writers themselves who had a platform from which they could champion or ridicule artists, albums and music scenes.¹⁷⁰

The structure of the web, especially as it has grown into the 2010s, allows audiences to communicate internationally far more easily, and blogging and social media offer the potential for ‘anyone to become a critic’ (provided they are web-literate, which is increasingly the norm given Post-Internet theory’s insistence that post-millennial youths are at one with digital technologies) without the expense associated with previous independent music writing (Kot, 2009, p. 114). Murthy explains that social networks, blogs and the net ‘can potentially be democratizing in that [they] can be thought of as a megaphone that makes public the voices [or in this context, tastes] of an individual’ (Murthy, 2013, p. 31). This illuminates the rising power of individual taste and personal curation in contemporary music, with Laing suggesting that online audiences hold an increasingly autonomous position in relation to locating/selecting new music (Laing, 2006, p. 339). Indeed, Harper has argued that even blogging (with *Pitchfork* as its most prominent success) is suffering from its continuing

¹⁷⁰ For more on the history, and in-depth studies of the role, of twentieth century music journalism, see Laing, 2006; Jones, 1992; Jones, 2002; Shuker, 1994; Gorman, 2001; and Toynbee, 1993.

reliance on traditional journalistic methodologies of curation, and is becoming increasingly eclipsed by the free-flowing forms of personalised social media. Social media, with its constantly changing newsfeeds and potential for instantaneous updates, is far more suited to a Post-Internet era in which web users are increasingly accustomed to navigating through information noise. Harper argues that

The right MP3 blogs [remain] the very best sources for emerging music, but they face competition from both sides, with bigger websites increasingly offering a stream of one-track news posts and *Tumblr* providing a broader, more flexibly multimedia platform for sharing interesting stuff without the onus to write an introduction (Harper, June 2013)

While this section focuses on blogging primarily, with increased reference to social and video networks such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* following in the analysis of musicians in later sections,¹⁷¹ it is important to note Harper's point. The fact that social media platforms are gradually overtaking blogs in terms of taste definition is indicative of the importance of the individual in, and fluid approaches to, contemporary musical distribution, exposure and distinction. It underlines the significance of the social aspect in Post-Internet music cultures, as well as the continuing move away from dictatorial platforms through which taste cultures have previously been established. It is also, as mentioned, evocative of the need for a system of musical discourse, curation and promotion that is capable of keeping pace with the inconsistent and malleable landscape of a milieu afflicted by information overload.

Blogging grew rapidly in the latter half of the 1990s (and beyond) and saw an increase in the readership of e-zines such as *The Quietus*, *Fact* and *Resident Advisor*. Yet it was the rise of *Pitchfork* that seemed to signal a change from 'top-down' systems of curatorial print journalism to a culture led by an empowered fan-base (Carter and Rogers, October 2014).¹⁷² As the Internet's overload of cultural material increased market saturation, multiplied subcultural scenes and introduced audiences to music from numerous contexts, it

¹⁷¹ See Section Six and Section Ten most prominently.

¹⁷² The question of whether or not *Pitchfork* actually does represent a more homogenised form of journalism is referred to later in this section.

became increasingly difficult for print magazines to maintain up-to-date coverage of contemporary music. Laing suggested in 2006 that ‘the availability of music on the Internet has already substantially lessened the influence of the music journalist as a cultural intermediary’ (Laing, 2006, p. 339), and this development has furthered throughout the following years. The instantaneous communicative systems of web milieux, fused with increasing comprehension of the Internet’s archival structures from Post-Internet users, results in musicians and sounds gaining coverage on blogs and social media some time before the next instalments of these weekly (or even monthly) publications are due, and it has become difficult for journalists to retain their authentic curatorial voice when they seem incapable of keeping pace with the music that becomes popular (and is then rapidly discarded) in online environments.¹⁷³ This has become even more pertinent in light of the ever-increasing prominence of social media, whose immediacy has resulted in a wider preference for brief-but-informative immediate fan reviews in tweets and *Facebook* updates.¹⁷⁴ Post-Internet audiences are arguably less likely to take the time to read lengthier pieces about music by experienced journalists located in traditional media outlets (let alone wait several weeks to access these articles) when they are completely immersed in a culture that offers constant and instantaneous gratification through new cultural material and information on a nigh-infinite basis (Carr, 2011; Levitin, 2014).¹⁷⁵ In the contemporary milieu, audiences seek brief samples, appraisals or condemnations of releases on social media, streaming sites or blogs, before either accessing the music online (usually before the reviews of physical magazines have even been published) or looking for more suitable sounds elsewhere. Itzkoff explains that magazines such as *NME* began to lose their readership

¹⁷³ It also very rapidly becomes ‘yesterday’s news’, given the previously mentioned shortening of attention spans.

¹⁷⁴ The shortening of attention spans (see Section One and Section Two) supposedly brought about by information noise has resulted in a culture that could be defined by popular Post-Internet era neologisms/abbreviations such as ‘oversharing’, ‘YOLO’ (‘you only live once’), ‘TMI’ (‘too much information’) and ‘tl;dr’ (‘too long; didn’t read’).

¹⁷⁵ See Sections Six and Nine for more on this.

to e-zines because sites such as *Pitchfork* could ‘write about music in any form and at any length it wanted. [...] Through the bands that it chose to focus on and the artists it ignored, [...] the site was speaking directly to listeners no longer served by traditional media outlets’ (Itzkoff, September 2006, p. 1). *Pitchfork* flourished due to the immediacy of its publication, its relatively inexpensive production costs and its focus on obscure artists, with its current readership of over 5.5 million unique visitors per month contrasting with the substantial dwindling of print publications’ audiences. Indeed, its success resulted in its reputation as the flagship of online music discussion, and the ultimate example of the potential for fan-built e-zines to completely re-shape previous systems of taste, reviewing and recommendation.

This rise contradictorily resulted in critics exercising caution in their praise of the site’s inspirational impact on blogging culture, voicing concern about its ‘evolution from bedroom lark to multimedia empire’ (Kot, 2009, p. 123). These fears hold significant weight within independent music culture. The idea of ‘selling-out’ frequently leads to an artist, publication or scene-follower becoming branded as inauthentic. *Pitchfork*, alongside other music blogs, has thus made every attempt to retain its relationship to subcultures, rather than the mainstream, despite its ever-increasing popularity (Carter and Rogers, October 2014). It seems to have succeeded, given the continuing rise of its readership and its lasting power over music tastes and online music production. However, it is perhaps this power that potentially provides a problem with the e-zine’s role in contemporary music milieux. In spite of its reputation as the pioneer of the Internet’s ‘bottom-up’ fan-led blog culture, the site has arguably started to take on the position that mainstream print media once held. Its influence over taste is no longer restricted to those on the margins of popular music, with mainstream magazines admitting that they are swayed by *Pitchfork* when covering new artists (Itzkoff, September 2006, p. 1). Despite retaining its authentic status through its adherence to the subcultural tastes of its readership, *Pitchfork* is now a curatorial force, with many blogs

simply copying its recommendations rather than being inspired by its championing of fan-curation. Reynolds highlights this problem by arguing that while two websites¹⁷⁶ may occupy exactly ‘the same amount of screen space’, with ‘neither seem[ing] any more accessible or less ubiquitous than the other’, the reality is that certain online publications inevitably hold a greater weight and receive a far higher amount of traffic (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 33). This disturbs the idea that ‘everything [online] is equal [or] on the same level’ while distorting ‘the dialectic of invisibility/secrecy and visibility/publicity that worked so well in the Analogue Era’ (ibid). To apply this to *Pitchfork*, then: the site has arguably become an example of the very curatorial journalism that blogging culture would seem to undermine due to its immense mediating power. The assertion by Reynolds and others is that those afflicted with the short attention spans caused by information noise will not spend time searching through a multitude of blogs when an authoritative site such as *Pitchfork* has already done the filtering on their behalf and presented it in a concise and accessible way. However, I would argue that social media has balanced this out, as the search functions, rapid connectivity to like-minded listeners, and brief updates of *Twitter* and other networks make them far more representative of the Post-Internet communicative styles of the current generation. The fan-led structures of social media and blogs are much more intuitive for their users than retromanic critics would suggest, creating a communicative, curatorial and promotional structure that relates to the shortened attention spans and temporal/spatial shifts of information noise culture. As people at absolute ease with the networks and systems of the Internet come to structure and navigate it in a way that mirrors their symbiotic relationship to the virtual, it seems likely that fan-led curation will only continue to develop, increase and improve online alongside larger outlets such as *Pitchfork*.

¹⁷⁶ He offers the example of the respective readerships of *The New York Times* website and independent music label Not Not Fun.

I now explore the techniques, methodologies and interactions that comprise blogging in popular music.¹⁷⁷ As explained, more free-flowing social media is considered in depth throughout the remainder of this thesis,¹⁷⁸ and as such I focus specifically on blogging as a distinct entity here. The key term ‘sharity’ is an informal name applied to the blog network that uploads, downloads and reviews music (Reynolds, 2011, p. 103). This system is remarkably diverse, with blogs existing for practically every form of recorded music (ibid). ‘Sharity’, ‘a three-way pun on “share” + “charity” + “rarity”’ (ibid), refers to the file-sharing that dominates online musical distribution/consumption, as well as the authority afforded to bloggers with the ability to locate the most obscure recordings. The blog network is similar in concept to amateur fanzines, but without the cost of production or distribution. It also contains many of the traits of online discussion forums, given that bloggers communicate and exchange opinions across the network, as well as in their own comments sections.¹⁷⁹ Yet it is their enabling of sharing music efficiently that has rendered blogs crucial to the new distributive and curatorial structures that define Post-Internet music culture.¹⁸⁰ Bloggers are easily able to link directly to *YouTube* videos of performances, embed tracks via *SoundCloud*, or provide links to torrenting sites containing entire albums. This has turned reviewing into an interactive experience, as bloggers frequently provide readers with a sample (or more) of the track, artist or album that they are evaluating. As Ryan Trecartin notes, ‘the way [cultural material] is shared, or the way people respond to it’ is perhaps the biggest change brought about by the Internet and contemporary milieux; the ‘reader’, rather than the creator or the

¹⁷⁷ This is a subject that has been covered in great depth in academia, with articles by Atton (September 2011, on noise music and blogging cultures), Galuszka (October 2014, on the increasing power that fans hold in the exposure and success of new artists), Heuman (May 2013, on the impact blogging has had on hardcore punk scenes), and Breen and Forde (2004, an overview of Internet music discussion as a whole) proving astute in their studies of the considerable shifts that blogging has generated within contemporary music.

¹⁷⁸ *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* are drawn on in Section Six, while *Instagram* and *Tumblr* are referenced throughout. Social media is also returned to in the overview of mainstream artists located in the conclusion of this thesis.

¹⁷⁹ These comments and debates take on wider significance when they are connected to social media, as it is often possible for blog posts and comments to be simultaneously posted on sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

¹⁸⁰ See Mewton, 2001.

curator, is increasingly empowered (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015). The words of the reviewer no longer need to be accepted without question, as audiences can experience the music themselves while reading. This increasingly ‘bottom-up’ system provides a platform for the promotion of previously overlooked styles and artists. Jam City notes that this cultural shift has ‘opened up a world of music to me that resonates on an emotional level, despite geographical and historic boundaries’, much of which was recommended by fellow music fans (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). Although, as stated, the Internet is not completely homogenised, it offers increased potential for self-curation to audiences that had previously relied on curatorial figures in the mainstream print media. Formerly, if an artist was unfavoured or deemed unlikely to connect with the readership of a major review-based periodical, they could either be reviewed negatively or discounted completely. This rejection by said magazine may, potentially, destroy their career at an early stage. With the vast selection of blogs now available, it is possible that at least one niche blog might promote that artist, even to a very small readership, and offer distribution and reviews of their work to an interested audience.^{xiii} In this context, Qirko argues that the ‘consumer’ (or the blogger/fan) has increasingly become the ‘authentic’ figure in determining which artists are worthy of further exposure (Qirko, 2014). He asserts that it is no longer primarily the musical prowess or publicity campaign of a musician that determines their success. Rather, I argue that it is their ability to connect with audiences through their manifestation of Middleton’s ‘truth of’ Post-Internet ‘cultural experience’ that renders their music authentic and attractive to web-based fans. In his interview for this thesis, ADR was positive about the impact of ‘sharity’ culture and interactivity between artists and their audiences online. He expects ‘music to be free and will never pay for it. [...] Attempts to force listeners to pay are frustrating to the point where I simply won’t engage. [...] That is the spirit of the Internet, and to resist that is

clinging to an outmoded and now unsustainable model' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015).¹⁸¹

The musicians analysed in the later chapters of this thesis locate authenticity in sharing vast quantities of cultural material at no expense in a virtual space of constant transnational flow and interaction.¹⁸²

It is here that the question of distinction becomes problematic, however. There is much lamentation in Reynolds' *Retromania* for a 'wheat-from-chaff' form of journalism that made it easier to distinguish music worth listening to from that which is not. As explained in Section One, Reynolds, Fisher and Morley are critical of the saturated nature of contemporary culture, suggesting that bloggers generate a disorganised oversized archive of past music that was ignored previously because it was supposedly undeserving of reaching a wider audience in its day (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 129-150). This provides a large part of their criticism of the Internet's archival systems: they suggest that a filter is required to maintain progression, rather than the constant cultural mining of the past that has become commonplace in a retromanic culture. I would argue that filters do exist in the form of larger e-zines such as *Pitchfork* that promote the most interesting new material illuminated by the vast blogging network. However, what is more pertinent is the fact that, structurally, the Internet's system of blogging and social media is (in theory) indiscriminate. Its reconfiguration of twentieth century distribution and promotion systems, as well as the information overload of its newsfeeds and timelines, renders prior notions of distinction somewhat obsolete. Post-Internet audiences are increasingly at ease with these new systems,

¹⁸¹ A large body of academic material and cultural commentary is dedicated to studies of 'sharity' culture, configurability and ownership of cultural material online. For further reading on the subject, see Stephen Witt's *How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy* (2015); Jochen Eisentraut's *The Accessibility of Music: Participation, Reception & Contact*, 2013; Aram Sinnreich's *Mashed Up: Music, Technology and the Rise of Configurable Culture* (2010); Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola's *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (2011); Simon Zagorski-Thomas' 'The stadium in your bedroom: functional staging, authenticity and the audience-led aesthetic in record production' (May 2010); Christine Boone's 'Mashing: Toward a Typology of Recycled Music' (September 2013); Austin Kleon's *Steal Like An Artist* (2012); and Mark Amerika's *remixthebook* (2011).

¹⁸² These themes are analysed in greater depth in Section Eight, in relation to the antagonistic noise-hop group Death Grips.

having never experienced earlier linear, analogue forms of curation/distribution. With this being the case, it becomes natural for web users to self-filter their musical tastes through these new channels. Reynolds' criticism of contemporary fan-curated culture, in which any blogger can promote a bricolage of music and artists from across time and space, seems ironic given that his journalistic role has long been one of curation. In the twentieth century, when communicative systems were comparatively limited, the curatorial knowledge of mainstream music journalists was a useful way of learning about new music and providing a filter through which 'good' and 'bad' music could be sifted out. In the inter-connected space of blog networks, however, this journalistic structure is unsuited to a system that allows audiences to do all of their own musical research and selection. Reflecting on this point, Joe Muggs¹⁸³ argues that it has 'become fashionable to say that blogs are just social detritus' comprised of various isolated groups of music fans 'mucking about' (Muggs, June 2011). However, many late-twentieth century major musical subcultures also grew from 'very small social circles [that] developed over years', and the same examples of 'mucking about' can be located in their moments of infancy (ibid). This is again evocative of Kissick's suggestion that the Internet is 'the new street' (Kissick, 2015). Dismissing unfiltered content on blogs ignores the fact that the trend toward eclecticism is a natural result of the Post-Internet generation's constant but – crucially – normalised exposure to information noise in their everyday lives. The multiplicity of these blogs may make them appear less 'serious' than earlier subcultural social circles, but that is again due to attempts to examine the Post-Internet condition using an incompatible conceptual framework. These criticisms are also overly reliant on the celebration of exclusivity that defined the localised scenes outlined in Thornton's writing, which is a form of capital that is seemingly incompatible with the transnational Post-Internet milieu.^{xiii}

¹⁸³ Joe Muggs' influential blog posts helped to expose musical styles such as grime and dubstep to wider audiences.

Authenticity debates, as underlined throughout this and the previous section, remain critical within the often fan-led structures of blogs and social media-based musical consumption. These spaces offer an increasingly fragmented curatorial sphere in which individuals communicate globally to locate and recommend music. As Laughey argues, ‘the Internet is a consumer-led medium [that] threatens any continuing semblance of the “cultural gatekeeper” figure. [...] Influential figures in the music industry [are] being [overthrown] by online’ audiences (Laughey, 2007, p. 179). Instantaneous communication, fan-led reviewing and global sharing are a crucial part of the development of music online, and have become a normalised form of musical consumption for the Post-Internet generation. Audiences are undoubtedly still interested in curatorial powers in the mainstream music press (and now high-readership e-zines such as *Pitchfork*), but authenticity is located in attempts to expose audiences to a wider range of obscure and interesting music. Indeed, the above-mentioned role of individualised social media in Post-Internet culture more widely (and its gradual movement toward replacing blogs) is further evidence of a system that enhances the potential for self-curation. The pessimism of Reynolds regarding the indiscriminate nature of ‘sharity’ ignores the fact that the contemporary musical milieu, driven by fans and audiences rather than dictated by curatorial journalists, is more comprehensible and user-friendly for the Post-Internet generation that has developed alongside it. Audiences increasingly lead crucial elements of musical milieux such as taste, distribution and reviewing. The progression that writers such as Reynolds and Fisher lament is built into the very system of ‘sharity’ that they have criticised for its retrospective tilt. It may not produce the immediately visible innovations of twentieth century musical experimentation, but it is restructuring popular musical discourse and practice for a youth culture that is intimately entwined with digital communicative sites and online archives. One of the key ironies of the retromanic account resides in its lament for a twentieth century form of innovation based on futurism and

progression. In this sense, these critics are paradoxically nostalgic for an archaic model of constant evolution, and theirs is an approach that thus seems ill suited to the fluctuations and changes that have become characteristic of the Post-Internet context. The remainder of this thesis illuminates musicians that are preoccupied with the experiences of Post-Internet culture, with much of their output self-consciously drawing on the interactivity and ‘sharity’ analysed in this section. Their aesthetics and self-representation deal with many of the themes developed in these opening two chapters, presenting an authentic vision of the ‘truth of cultural experience’ in the Post-Internet era.

CHAPTER THREE: *Irony, critique & social media*

Chapter 3 – Section 5: PC Music and irony versus sincerity

[The] use of instantly gratifying elements such as kitsch imagery, catchy hooks, synthetic colours and fun sound effects feels inevitable, it's almost a compulsion rather than a choice (A.G. Cook, quoted in Golsorkhi-Ainslie, 2013)

‘What genre do you coin yourself?’

‘Advertising’ (SOPHIE, quoted in Grant, 2014)

I have established in the first four sections of this thesis that authenticity to cultural and contextual experience remains a significant aspect of popular music culture in the Post-Internet era. The remaining sections of this thesis centre on musicians who explore deeply personal explorations of Post-Internet identity. However, as noted in the second and third sections, there is a tendency within this Post-Internet music culture toward an ethos that is marked by irony, kitsch and distancing that seems informed by the tropes and sensibilities of *DIS Magazine*. An analysis of music making in the Post-Internet milieu would be incomplete without illuminating the work of these artists, which engages with Post-Internet ideas in an allegedly less ‘sincere’ way than those musicians considered latterly. Much of this ironic stance is located in the web-based genre ‘vaporwave’ and the rapidly-growing UK label PC Music, headed by A.G. Cook and featuring the surreal pop pastiche of artists such as Hannah Diamond, QT, GFOTY and, most crucially, SOPHIE. In this section of the thesis I explore the work of these musicians, as well as the *DIS*-affiliated act #HDBOYZ, to offer an initial overview of one particular style of self-reflexive Post-Internet art. Many other artists addressed in this thesis have expressed an aversion to this ironic aesthetic in interviews, including Fatima Al Qadiri (‘aesthetically they’re covering very old ground, and musically it’s not my thing’ [Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014]) and Jesse Kanda (‘that aesthetic was a little too ironic for me. [...] It’s more of a thing that I’m aware of and watch from afar than something I want to be a part of’ [Kanda, thesis interview, 2014]). Yet this rejection by artists that consider their work to be marked by a more ‘honest’ ethos, while worth noting, does not wholly negate the importance of PC Music or vaporwave. Indeed, as I indicate throughout

this section, there remains an investment in authenticity even among musicians that appear to be entirely tongue-in-cheek at least stylistically, as they offer their own perspective on issues such as identity, information noise and the virtual plaza in Post-Internet culture. Their aesthetics may be clichéd, but that does not mean that audiences cannot locate authentic representations of contemporary culture in their output.

Adam Harper has written extensively on digital music forms that assume ironic aesthetics, and he brought the term ‘vaporwave’ – which had previously been circulated on several obscure blogs – to a wider musical public. Vaporwave as a genre emerged online in the early 2010s. At the sonic level, it is

sample based, layering and warping pieces of the most reviled forms of music in the recording era: chintzy 80s lounge, smooth jazz, Muzak. Sometimes producers slow down and layer samples till they sound like velvety R&B slow jams, or chop and repeat them to create a sort of languid stutter. [...] The aesthetic is dominated by gauzy reverb and a polished synthetic veneer, and visually it leans toward retrofuturistic imagery – luminous 3D bubbles, for instance, or blocky skylines, made to look like outmoded computer renderings in toxic Day-Glo colours (Galil, 2013)

This aesthetic is decidedly self-conscious, and is designed specifically to invoke and dramatise the capitalist sheen of the virtual plaza described in the second section. The artists that exhibit the style, including INTERNET CLUB, James Ferraro and ADR, present their music ‘as a collection of inspiringly modern, motivational and mood-regulating settings – perfect for that infomercial, that menu screen, that in-flight safety video, that business park promotional video, that drinks reception in the lobby’ (Harper, 12 July 2012). Vaporwave oscillates between critiquing the capitalist digital realm that it inhabits, and merely replicating it in a straightforward pastiche. The aesthetic is informed by the ‘pacification’ techniques that maintain the soothing ambience of commercial plazas.¹⁸⁴ By drawing on the sounds and imagery of these relaxing corporate spaces,¹⁸⁵ vaporwave provides all of the glossy surfaces of the plaza without offering the fulfilment of an actual product. It is fitting that the name of

¹⁸⁴ See Section Two.

¹⁸⁵ Aesthetics emphasised in vaporwave include synthetic Muzak and imagery ranging from kitsch computer graphics to 1990s *Windows* ‘screensaver’-referencing font styles.

the genre is derived from ‘vaporware’, ‘a derisory term for a software or hardware project undertaken by a tech company that is announced to the public but which, after much time passes, never actually comes to fruition’ (ibid), as this music draws attention to the emptiness of capitalist appeasement. The idyllic spaces of the virtual plaza are merely a distraction from the realities of the physical world, and vaporwave highlights this by removing the ultimate ‘prize’ for the consumer – the product – while retaining the imagery of corporate marketing, advertising and pacification. James Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual* (2011) is perhaps the quintessential example of this style, and ‘is inspired by [...] the *Windows 95* sound [...] and the melodies that kick out of a medium-priced keyboard when you punch the “demo” button. It’s a collection of eerily wholesome sounds delivered in an uncomfortably straightforward manner’ (Soderberg, November 2011). The album critiques the links between art, commerce and Post-Internet existence through its highly conceptualised appropriation of the aesthetics of Muzak and the virtual plaza, while artwork connected with the release references corporate logos and ironically celebrates digital advertising techniques (see Figure 31). Each track is fully synthetic, offering no organic alternative to its corporate adverts, robotic samples and cybernetic textures. The record is primarily a straightforward pastiche of commoditised culture: there is ‘no distance between the concept and the execution here’ (ibid). This is not a criticism of the album; rather, it is a signifier of the deliberate aesthetic palette that Ferraro is drawing on for his critique. What Ferraro and other vaporwave artists are aiming to problematise is the hyper-corporate state of Post-Internet existence. Digital technology, evoked in the hyper-vivid automata of the sounds of vaporwave, has become intrinsically connected to capital and commerce. The aesthetics employed by vaporwave musicians thus contribute to an evocation and questioning of the soothing kitsch of the virtual plaza.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Ferraro’s work is analysed in greater depth in Section Six, as he also utilises social media and *YouTube* to further his critique of digital ‘trash’ in the Post-Internet era (Iadorola, July 2014).

In his analysis of this style, however, Harper becomes concerned that there is a media tendency to associate all Post-Internet music with this individual and increasingly visible aesthetic, eliding the vast array of sounds available online in favour of one specific formula. In particular, he is concerned that the ‘negative connotations and reactionary aesthetics’ (Harper, 10 September 2013) of vaporwave have come to generically define all music that seeks to self-consciously explore digital cultures. He argues that the dominance of vaporwave-esque aesthetics is liable to lead critics to regard Post-Internet music as

weird, disposable stuff [...] on the Internet. Not proper music, not like vinyl or CDs or music from a label that pays a distributor. It’s that stuff with the silly names – what was it, vaporwave, seapunk? [...] It’s difficult to keep track of the *Tumblr* generation and their weird new memes! It has that tingly hi-fi sound, and sounds a bit weird, maybe there’s a naked 3D virtual woman on the cover, floating above a blue watery backdrop or something, maybe it’s a little kitschy. [...] I’ve seen people assuming that, like ‘Internet music’, the terms ‘seapunk’ and ‘vaporwave’ will refer to any form of online new music with a certain, very general flavour. Seapunk and vaporwave are just two of many, many different kinds of [online] music (ibid)

Essentially, Harper is concerned that the concept of an ‘Internet’ sound¹⁸⁷ is in danger of becoming wholly parodic and ironic. He fears the staleness that may grow from attempts to delineate online music in such terms, stating that he ‘love[s] vaporwave. [...] At its best it’s a provocative, complex and highly modern statement. [But] imagine it getting stupider, then more commonplace, then sticking around for more or less a decade’ (ibid). If, as Harper suggests, the dominant perspective of Post-Internet music is one of a singular sound that renders virtual culture kitschy and humorous, then the argument that web-based music maintains a continuing interest in authenticity potentially diminishes. This makes it easier for retromanic critics to overlook the many other examples of ‘worthwhile’ musical production online and further cements the notion that contemporary audiences are more likely to locate authenticity in pre-Internet musical styles. Criticism of the style’s prominence is widespread, and is seemingly damaging the reputation of Post-Internet musical production. Jam City

¹⁸⁷ For clarity I continue to employ the term ‘Post-Internet’ instead of ‘Internet’, but in reference to the same musical milieu as that described by Harper.

asserts that the often ‘insincere’ sound ‘glorifies the surfaces of corrupt consumerist lifestyle culture without locating those images within a larger context’, thus limiting its potential to explore the overarching conditions of Post-Internet culture (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). This is a perspective that I return to at the conclusion of this section, as I argue that the ironic distanciation of vaporwave and others actually retains and presents a specific (if different) idea of authenticity that merits examination in the same way as those musicians with a more ‘sincere’ approach.

Perhaps the most visible example of the aesthetics and themes of vaporwave and *DIS* being reappropriated can be found in the work of the label PC Music. Formed by A.G. Cook and current *DIS* music editor Finn Diesel in 2013, the label’s name alludes to ‘how the computer is a really crucial tool [...] for making amateur music that is also potentially very slick, where the difference between bedroom and professional studio production can be very ambiguous’ (A.G. Cook, quoted in Golsorkhi-Ainslie, 2013). The name, then, provides an initial signifier for the importance of digital technology and online spaces in this label’s aesthetic. The style of PC Music’s artists is consistent across the imprint, with key contributors such as SOPHIE, GFOTY, Hannah Diamond, QT and A.G. Cook himself all producing tracks with similar themes and sonic characteristics. As Sherburne explains,

Many details of the label [...] are unclear, including just how many people are involved. [...] The roster is a rogue’s gallery of aliases, avatars, red herrings, and unknown quantities, [...] each turning out variations on the same set of slick, chirpy, unhinged chart-pop themes (Sherburne, September 2014)

These ‘chart-pop themes’ take the form of a ‘sickly-sweet take on pop and club music, [but] tempos are increased, [infantile female] vocals are routinely chipmunked and the synths all glisten like the lipgloss of its roster of stars’ (Wilson, August 2014). The sound features overbearingly glowing production, exaggerated sub-bass and rapid beats. The label’s visual styles exhibit this kitschy glo-fi aesthetic too, with Finn Diesel asserting in his interview for this thesis that he thinks ‘that media that is bold, bright and busy’ is more interesting and

stimulating in a culture of information overload (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015).¹⁸⁸ In essence, the label is exaggeratedly evoking the hyper-vivid and saccharine gloss of kitsch vocal pop such as J-Pop/K-Pop and eurodance, as well as the accelerated BPM and intensified bass drops of happy hardcore and EDM.¹⁸⁹ These styles have not been considered ‘serious’ or ‘authentic’ forms of music within rave and club cultures,¹⁹⁰ given glossy pop’s connections to the mainstream and happy hardcore/EDM’s apparent prioritising of ‘cheap thrills’ over intricate sound design¹⁹¹ (Wilson, August 2014). Many tracks include female vocalists singing clichéd lyrics about love, sex and, most saliently for this thesis, their relationship to social media, digital technology and consumer culture. These vocalists are presented in one of two ways: they are either the ‘named’ artist on the track (e.g. Hannah Diamond, GFOTY) or an anonymous singer guesting on a song by the named producer (e.g. SOPHIE). Regardless, in both scenarios the vocals are ‘perfected’ through autotune to the point that they become robotic and inhuman. I analyse a Post-Internet trend toward the exploration of cyborgian female vocals more expansively in Section Eight, but it is worth noting that PC Music hold a deliberately playful stance in relation to this methodology, most evidently through the work of the label’s most famous collaborator SOPHIE.

SOPHIE is a ‘male producer posing as a female 80s R&B singer’ (Lester, August 2014) whose tracks feature anonymous (often infantile sounding) female vocalists. This evokes multiple issues raised in queer theory and cyborgism, as well as in debates about anonymity online, both of which are illuminated in later sections of this thesis.¹⁹² Described

¹⁸⁸ See, for instance, the artwork for Kane West’s 2014 release *Western Beats*, which foregrounds the blocky font *Comic Sans* (a now-clichéd hallmark of early websites) (Figure 32), or the remarkably vivid colours that comprise the cover of Tielsie’s 2014 single ‘Palette’ (Figure 33): colours that self-consciously match the bright ‘chipmunk’ vocals of the track.

¹⁸⁹ This was most visibly presented on the label’s collaborative 2014 mix/‘mission statement’ hosted by *DJS Magazine* and its 2015 *SXSW* live showcase. It was also discussed openly during BBC Radio 1’s Huw Stephens’ March 2015 interview with A.G. Cook, QT, Hannah Diamond and GFOTY.

¹⁹⁰ This is focused on in Section Three.

¹⁹¹ These styles are regarded as simplistic when compared with, for example, the intricate aesthetics of techno, the complexity of IDM, the insular darkness of dubstep, the extroverted aggression of grime, etc.

¹⁹² These issues are discussed more prominently in Sections Six, Seven, Eight and Nine.

as potentially ‘the most divisive [sound] in UK music of recent times’ (Finlayson, August 2014), SOPHIE’s music is marked by an

aesthetic of excess and cheese, [...] digging a sugar cavity so deep he hit a nerve. It’s a perfect balance between nostalgia and repulsion, as echoes of lowest common denominator pop music and childish vocals are glossed to up to such a sheen that they squeak and grimace. It’s jarring in the most obvious way it can be (Cliff, August 2014)

The ‘excess and cheese’ in SOPHIE’s tracks is drawn from a range of sources, comprising late-1990s eurodance groups such as Vengaboys and Aqua;¹⁹³ the ‘fast-cut barrage of [...] house, 90s rave, [...] grotesquely gurgling dubstep bass, fizzy trance rushes, high-sugar 80s soft-rock choruses and sudden bursts of abstract noise’ that define Skrillex and EDM’s sound of ‘information overload’ (Muggs, April 2014); and the early-2010s ‘virtual reality Japanese pop stars’ whose androgyny renders them surreal and cyborg-like (Ravens, June 2013). SOPHIE’s music is ‘pure pop concentrate’ (Lester, August 2014), designed to appeal to a generation raised on an insatiable and consistently stimulated appetite for file-sharing, instantaneous news, HD movies, easy access to pornographic and violent material, and energy drinks. SOPHIE is essentially providing a sound comparable to the ironic, distanced aesthetic of *DIS* and PC Music. Tracks such as ‘Bipp’ (2013) and ‘Lemonade’ (2014) feature experimental sonic textures, but their ‘childish vocals’ are undoubtedly their most provocative aspect. The voices on these tracks are clearly ‘feminine’, but they are sterilised and roboticised to the point that they seem plastic and disconcertingly mechanical. The cyborgian young girls in his tracks endlessly repeat sloganized refrains such as ‘I can make you feel better if you let me’ or ‘l-l-lemonade’. This renders them automaton in function, with the singers being used as instruments whose vocals lose another part of their ‘identity’ with each repetition. SOPHIE even uses these feminine child-like vocals to represent his public persona, as in an interview on BBC Radio 1 during which the producer answered

¹⁹³ Both achieved mainstream success by introducing humour, camp, novelty lyrics and sing-a-long choruses into house music.

questions ‘in a high-pitched, processed-sounding voice that resembled a mewling cat or a sick child’ (Fitzmaurice, October 2013). When asked to recommend a track that best summarises the ‘history of bass’ music for him (Skream, Mac and SOPHIE, 14 September 2013), SOPHIE ironically and humorously selected ‘West End Girls’ by The Pet Shop Boys (1986). This choice subverts the typically ‘masculinised’ nature of contemporary club music (while mirroring SOPHIE’s own ‘feminine’ sound), as the queering nature of Neil Tennant’s ‘thin lead voice’ mentioned in Section Three (Frith, 1996, p. 6) and the lighter, pop-inflected synth sounds contrast heavily with the extreme bass drops and rapid break-beats of post-2010 EDM. This tongue-in-cheek form of public identity is a trend that occurs throughout PC Music’s output. As noted in the above Sherburne quote, each of the musicians’ ‘unclear [...] aliases’ seems to be a ‘character’, fulfilling an oft-exaggerated version of various different stereotypical pop stars: GFOTY is the hyper-sexualised social networking diva, tweeting about minutiae constantly, QT is the glamorous model advertising corporate products, and SOPHIE is the asexual maverick.

This approach is designed to provoke humour from fans, but also to generate animosity from artists with more ‘sincere’ self-representation.^{xiv} There is a clear playfulness in SOPHIE’s selection of sounds and lyrics that would, in much music culture, be deemed inauthentic or, colloquially, ‘cheesy’. The notion of authenticity remains critical in a Post-Internet culture, and it retains importance even in these ironic attempts to draw on the hyper-corporate virtual plaza and deliberately kitsch sources. One of the critical elements I have referred to previously¹⁹⁴ is the fundamental relationship between mainstream ‘pop’ music and supposed inauthenticity; in other words, the music released on major labels, which dominates the charts, is viewed in critical contexts as the binary opposite of ‘good’, ‘authentic’ (and often) independent music that has a limited audience but is seen to retain artistic integrity by

¹⁹⁴ See Section Three.

refusing to ‘sell out’ (however defined by its contextual audience). PC Music, in this context, holds a complex relationship to authenticity debates due to its comparability to the ‘synthetic’ sounds of contemporary pop.¹⁹⁵ The label’s overriding sound, as described above, is almost excessively indebted to the most artificial and commercial forms of pop music. There are certain textural similarities to the maximalist synth-pop of Lady Gaga, the (much-maligned) eurodance of Aqua or Whigfield’s ‘Saturday Night’ (1994), and the autotune-driven 2000s R&B of Britney Spears and The Black Eyed Peas: styles and artists that, it is crucial to note, are considered ‘inauthentic’ to many audiences due to their perceived corporate connections. Indeed, these artists are almost deemed so clichéd and exaggeratedly ‘fake’ that they become novelty acts; an ironic representation of all that the underground considers ‘bad’ about pop music. Yet PC Music, a label with a limited audience and ties to an experimental art site in *DIS*, revels in these sounds and has made them the primary focus of its aesthetic. SOPHIE showed an affection for the mainstream rather than the so-called ‘underground’ throughout his interview for this thesis, explaining that he regards descriptions of his work as ‘pure pop concentrate’ as complimentary (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015). This is made explicit on his track ‘Hard’ (2014), in which the ‘feminine’ singer¹⁹⁶ lists a selection of plastic S&M devices,¹⁹⁷ self-reflexively sexualising the synthetic and the ‘fake’ in a similar way to the fashion of Hood By Air.¹⁹⁸ As Pattison argues, PC Music is not concerned ‘with the old language of authenticity or subversion’, instead referencing a selection of garish and ‘kitsch’ sources to disintegrate these supposedly outmoded concepts in favour of a Post-Internet palette that evokes an era of ‘acceleration, connectedness [and] ease of commodification’ (Pattison, November 2014, p. 93). As I have suggested, many have regarded this as pure irony and humour, with Wilson suggesting that the divisive PC Music may be an ‘art school

¹⁹⁵ This theme is similar to the *DIS Magazine*’s ‘Best And Worst’ feature, analysed in the appendix.

¹⁹⁶ The singer is uncredited, but has a vocal cadence unquestionably similar to that of fellow PC Music artist GFOTY.

¹⁹⁷ She repeatedly references ‘PVC’, ‘rubber dolls’, ‘silicon’ and ‘latex gloves’.

¹⁹⁸ HBA is highlighted in Sections Two and Seven, as well the conclusion of this thesis.

joke’, embracing the most reviled musical forms to infuriate those in opposition to the mainstream while conning would-be fans into believing that there is hidden genuineness or ‘meaning’ in their productions (Wilson, August 2014).

However, I would argue that this perspective unfairly belittles the tastes and intelligence of the label’s fans, as well as ignoring a more nuanced critique located in PC Music’s aesthetic. In reference to irony, but utilising comparable language to Allan Moore’s assertions regarding authenticity’s subjectivity and ascribed nature, Linda Hutcheon stresses that

The major players in the ironic game are indeed the interpreter and the ironist. The interpreter may – or may not – be the intended addressee of the ironist’s utterance, but s/he (by definition) is the one who attributes irony and then interprets it: in other words, the one who decides whether the utterance is ironic (or not), and then what particular ironic meaning it might have (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11)

The ‘interpreter’, not the ironist, attributes irony, and it can therefore be a signifier of something more than empty insincerity depending on the perspective of the receiver. If the interpreter locates themes or ideas that resonate personally with them in the ‘ironist’s utterance’ then its ‘ironic meaning’ may actually hold authentic significance for them, where others may see nothing but disconnected humour. When I spoke to SOPHIE and Finn Diesel, both were clear that while ‘humour is essential’ to their work, ‘it simply wouldn’t be possible to invest so heavily into something without caring about it sincerely’ (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015). Diesel even asserted that, for PC Music, ‘humour is a way of brewing a deeply anti-authoritarian approach to life and a radical political consciousness’ (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015). As explained in the second section,¹⁹⁹ *DIS* and its associates borrow ironically from commercialised sources (such as mainstream pop music, advertisements and consumerist products) and exaggerate their use until it becomes shocking and disturbing. This critiques the glossy idealism of the virtual plaza, mirrors the decline of high and low cultural

¹⁹⁹ There is also analysis of this in the appendix.

boundaries generated by information noise culture, and ultimately parodies the often clichéd and ‘instantly gratifying elements’ that dominate contemporary popular music (A.G. Cook, quoted in Golsorkhi-Ainslie, 2013).²⁰⁰ Critic Britt Brown notes (despite his refusal to be drawn on whether he sees the label as sincere or parodic) that ‘PC Music’s aesthetic of conformity [highlights] that there is no longer a perceivable divide between art and commerce, between rebellion and acquiescence’ (Brown, August 2015, p. 55). Daniel Neofetou defends the label more explicitly, believing that ‘their music deploys would-be clichéd elements to wholly sincere ends’ (Neofetou, 2015). As he further asserts,

While many critics have interpreted [the label’s music] as sarcasm, it is contrarily often the only way that one might be earnest [in the virtual plaza]. [PC Music’s signees] turn to styles which would have once been declared obsolete, dismissed as lowbrow, or reserved for coded parody, having internalised the argument that they shouldn’t be taken seriously, but taking them seriously anyway (ibid)

Rather than simply engaging in empty parody or pastiche, PC Music maintains a critical and self-conscious approach to its appropriation of ‘lowbrow’ styles.

The label’s roster illuminates this critical methodology during live performances, most notably during a 2014 showcase for *Boiler Room* that featured SOPHIE and QT.²⁰¹ SOPHIE’s set (see Figure 34) parodied the ‘superficiality’ of pop music in the digital age (Abellera, 2014), as he

sent out a skinny, light-skin black drag queen in a skimpy blue bodysuit tucked into a black leather miniskirt [...] to stand-in as ‘SOPHIE’ and ‘play’ a recording of his music. [...] The actual SOPHIE stood on the side of the stage dressed in a suit as a security guard holding a stern look on his face, [while the drag queen stood at] the DJ equipment, pushing buttons and spinning knobs in synch with the beat (ibid)

This mocks the ‘cult of personality’ (ibid) that surrounds celebrity culture in a social media-oriented world,²⁰² and its critique reveals that there is more to the PC Music aesthetic than

²⁰⁰ Full studies of the relationship between independent music and corporate companies have been written by Friedlander (November 2014) and Walmsley (February 2015), and provide further insight into the virtual plaza.

²⁰¹ QT is a collaborative project by A.G. Cook, SOPHIE and an unnamed female vocalist/model.

²⁰² This is a technique explored in full in the next section. It can also be read as a mockery of allegedly inauthentic and ‘simplistic’ DJ sets from mainstream celebrity DJs such as deadmau5 and Calvin Harris (Abellera, 2014).

mere ironic referencing and over-the-top stylistic tropes. SOPHIE argues that ‘it doesn’t matter whose face and whose voice [the message] comes from. The attitudes and opinions are consistent and give a stronger impression of an artist’s personality/persona than I think more standard approaches to press do’ (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015). QT’s performance featured a wigged model lip-syncing over an extended and repetitive version of the collaboration’s sole track to date, ‘Hey QT’ (released on XL, 2014). QT, as well as being a ‘musician’, is also a new ‘energy drink brand’ (Sherburne, September 2014) that was advertised during the set and appears on all marketing for the single (see Figure 35). This parodies the corporate nature of music in the virtual plaza, but it is also connected to the ‘attention-deficit disorder’ that Reynolds and Fisher claim is a result of information noise and over-stimulation. A high-sugar caffeinated energy drink is a powerful symbol of the increasing pressures and accelerating pace of Post-Internet existence. As such, PC Music’s artists have generated an aesthetic that is designed to both appeal to and critique contemporary appetites for short-term stimuli that (supposedly) define contemporary audiences.²⁰³ As SOPHIE explains,

There is a lot of noise online. Lots of things competing for your attention. [You have to] make whatever you are trying to communicate loud and clear. [...] I knew my music had to be immediate because you only get about five seconds of listening time on the Internet before the listener flicks over. I wanted my songs to communicate everything in the first five seconds and try to make those five seconds the most explosive and ear-catching possible. It’s a constant drive to make my music more minimal, more direct, more immediate, more explosive, more concise, [and] as potent, intense, concentrated and distilled as possible. [...] Sensory overload [is] what I’m aspiring to (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2015)

In other words, the use of pop hooks, excessive treble, extreme bass and high-pitched vocals is a self-conscious effort on the part of PC Music’s artists to satiate the shortened attention spans that evidently mark the Post-Internet era. It is clear from PC Music’s style that they aim to express sonically (and visually, as the label’s artwork and websites suggest) an image that

²⁰³ The video for the track prominently features the emoji-inflicted phrase ‘☹ Sensing Disconnect’, an indication of the lack of focus that apparently mars the emotional resonance of the Post-Internet generation.

humorously parodies and pastiches the omniscience of corporate advertising and the omnivorous appetite for cultural material that define Post-Internet environments. As A.G. Cook has argued, PC Music's 'constant use of instantly gratifying elements such as kitsch imagery, catchy hooks, synthetic colours and fun sound effects feels inevitable, it's almost a compulsion rather than a choice' in a culture marked by these phenomena (quoted in Golsorkhi-Ainslee, 2013). Indeed, SOPHIE efficiently summarised the label's relationship to these issues by explaining that the genre term that best sums up his music – and that of PC Music as a whole – is 'advertising' (Grant, 2014). As suggested earlier, this self-conscious style, which is simultaneously a critique and an embodiment of mainstream corporate imagery, utilises 'inauthentic' aesthetics but is authenticated by its attempts to critically explore the current Post-Internet context and condition. A.G. Cook refuses to accept that there is no authenticity in the PC Music oeuvre, as he tries 'to be thoughtful as to how and why I'm using these things, and I think my over-the-top use of structure and layout is a result of this. It's also what makes the work feel ambiguous' (quoted in Golsorkhi-Ainslie, 2013). PC Music takes many commercialised elements of contemporary culture²⁰⁴ and exaggerates them, providing a sugar-fuelled sound designed simultaneously to mock, satiate and critique the wavering attentions of its audiences. In doing so, the label's artists generate a nuanced account of the virtual spaces that surround them, offering a distanced but accurate and, from the perspective of both the label and its fans, truthful evocation of the Post-Internet condition.

Another *DIS*-related act that employs similar themes is the pseudo-pop band #HDBOYZ, described as the 'world's first boy band in high definition' (*DIS*, 2011). A group in the mould of mainstream 2010s boy bands such as One Direction and The Wanted, it is comprised of five male artists involved with *DIS*: Tabor Robak, Colin Self, Ryder Ripps,

²⁰⁴ They draw primarily on 'synthetic' pop and dance.

Alex Kelly-Hoffman and, most crucially, Aaron David Ross.²⁰⁵ Much of ADR's work is based around similar themes to those of vaporwave and PC Music, particularly an interest in garish and hyper-vivid pop sounds and a tongue-in-cheek approach to critiquing corporate aspects of Post-Internet experiences. His output 'hits on primarily three levels – a satirical playfulness, an aesthetic obsession, and a spiritual awakening', and is simultaneously 'a critique, [...] a celebration and [an] extension of' celebrity culture, pop music and the commoditisation of the virtual plaza (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). #HDBOYZ is perhaps the most extreme example of these themes. The group was 'formed based around a post on *Twitter* [and] are the next wave of teen dream sensations, connecting their love of virtual culture with the cultural worship of pre-fab pop' (Jones, October 2011). These descriptions, taken from publicity pieces about the group, give an immediate indication of the importance of the Internet and web culture to their image. Although they pose as a 'genuine' boy band, the reality is that the artists involved perform at New York's Museum of Modern Art instead of at large stadia and draw on self-consciously Post-Internet lyrics and imagery.²⁰⁶ This marks #HDBOYZ out as, effectively, a self-reflexive art installation that emulates more successful groups. The music of the group is like a hyperbolic version of boy band pop, fusing the HD aesthetics of PC Music with exaggeratedly emotive choruses. Artist and self-proclaimed digital strategist Luna Vega describes #HDBOYZ's

lyrical content [as an] approximation of standard boy band tropes mixed with common online tech speak. On their song 'Photoshopped' they try to convince a girl to leave her boyfriend because he looks too artificial and polished by the *Adobe* engine, and on 'Unzip' they use the analogy of compressed files as a love induced come-on with other [...] tech speak double entendres thrown in for good measure (Vega, 2011)

The ideas evoked by the group provide an interesting statement about the issues raised here.

Carefully constructed images of the band are constantly subjected to filtering, Photoshopping

²⁰⁵ Aaron David Ross is better known as ADR, one member of the Post-Internet audiovisual duo Gatekeeper discussed in Section Ten.

²⁰⁶ Many of the themes in #HDBOYZ's lyrics, such as social media and narcissism, are considered in greater depth in the next section.

and plastic, overly vivid stylisation (see Figures 36 and 37), while the vocals in their music feature so much autotune that they sound robotic.²⁰⁷ This is all indicative of a culture that struggles to separate the virtual and the digital, the synthetic and the organic. Their songs cannot invoke ideas about love, sex or celebrity without reference to either consumer or digital culture, whether through deliberately foregrounded product placement (their publicity shots feature carefully positioned HD televisions, Mountain Dew soda and designer clothing), the pun on ‘zipped files’ in the song ‘Unzip’, or the overuse of Photoshop and autotune. As ADR adeptly asserts,

Symptomatic of life online is love online. With so much of meeting, flirting, courting and building relationships happening in cyberspace. Everyone in the group came of age in the time that the Internet was becoming ubiquitous in middle class homes. [...] We became young adults and started our first intimate relationships mediated by these tools. This created certain problems and certain advantages in our ability to communicate with our respective partners. [...] These issues [inspired] the puns that became our lyrics (ADR, thesis interview, 2015)

On one level, this is a vacuous pastiche of Post-Internet culture and an ironic distanced critique of identity politics in the contemporary era. It could be argued that #HDBOYZ take many of the recognisable traits of the Post-Internet condition and simply replicate them, much like the criticism that is aimed at vaporwave and PC Music. Yet the garishness of their imagery and the provocative nature of their lyrics and music render them distinctly avant-garde in style. While there is clear irony in their output, the extremity of their image is disturbing. The group is decidedly Post-Internet, in that they essentially ‘wear’ the Internet in every possible way, evoking the notion that digital culture is present in every aspect of everyday contemporary life.²⁰⁸ ADR maintains that authenticity is a critical driving force behind his and the rest of the group’s output. He believes that ‘there is most definitely sincerity in our generation’s pastiche and parody, [and] when it’s easy to separate irony and sincerity, the work becomes much less interesting’ (ibid). In other words, the selection of

²⁰⁷ This is a trend expanded on in Section Eight.

²⁰⁸ See the discussion of James Ferraro in Section Six.

‘motifs which are often discarded as undesirable, stock or mundane’ is balanced by a desire to ‘present a unique perspective based on [his] own proximity to that which is being appropriated, [...] giving it honesty and purpose’ (ibid). The sounds, imagery and themes may be unquestionably inauthentic, exaggerated and ironic, but the execution of the ideas and compositional methodology of #HDBOYZ is deliberate and self-conscious, rendering the group’s work authentic in its echo of the juxtapositions of the virtual plaza and the Post-Internet condition.²⁰⁹ xv

This section has outlined the work of artists with direct ties to *DIS Magazine* who explore Post-Internet culture without embodying it in the same serious way as those artists that comprise the latter chapters of this thesis. Many of these musicians have been criticised for their ironic posturing, due to an assumption that it could have a negative effect on the reception of music that claims to engage more honestly with Post-Internet themes. However, as I have argued throughout this section, the synthetic and corporate aesthetic of PC Music, SOPHIE, #HDBOYZ and vaporwave maintains an aura of authenticity despite its humorous and flippant nature. Indeed, the style of more serious artists such as Ryan Trecartin, Fatima Al Qadiri and Fade To Mind²¹⁰ is strongly audible in the aesthetic of PC Music especially (Frank, 2014), even if those musicians would prefer not to align their output with the label. The boundaries between those that are ironically parodying and those that are artistically embodying the Post-Internet condition are therefore blurry and complex. The music of these artists might be synthetic, and it may be designed partially to provoke irate reactions from apparently sincere musicians, but it remains representative of Post-Internet culture. It hones in on the virtual plaza as a constant feature of contemporary digital spaces and draws on several issues pertaining to identity politics in the online era, both of which are large aspects

²⁰⁹ Indeed, many of the themes of #HDBOYZ (including a symbiotic relationship with digital enhancement techniques, the impact of virtual spaces on sexual identity, vocal manipulation, narcissism, and the notion of ‘wearing’ the Internet) are similarly embodied in the work of supposedly more sincere musicians outlined in later sections. These issues are explored in greater depth in Sections Six, Seven, Eight and Ten.

²¹⁰ These artists are reviewed in later sections.

of the ‘cultural experience’ of Post-Internet life.²¹¹ What these artists have created, then, in their pastiche of online culture, is an ironic but measured representation of the experiences of the Post-Internet generation, most prominently in relation to the hyper-corporate nature of the web.

²¹¹ This is highlighted later in this thesis in relation to musicians with a reputation for a more ‘sincere’ style.

Chapter 3 – Section 6: Social media, anonymity, narcissism and total transparency

There has long been something attractive, tantalising and romantic about an anonymous artist, especially one who chooses to be (Harper, July 2013)

[These musicians] have cried wolf so many times that nobody knows what's real any more – but instead of wanting to ignore them, our fascination only increases (Beaumont-Thomas, April 2012)

In an era where music and cult of personality have become one, [...] navigating the press [is a] means of disrupting the system while simultaneously exposing its inner workings (Friedlander, 25 September 2014)

In the previous section I addressed a range of musicians whose work ironically and parodically pastiches and critiques various garish, hyper-commercial and over-stimulating elements of Post-Internet culture. Before I present an analysis of artists who more thoroughly and personally embody these concepts, this section highlights musicians exploring the current generation's preoccupation with – even reliance on – social media. The musicians examined here maintain a comparable critical and humorous distance to that of *DIS Magazine*, PC Music and their affiliates, but their work goes beyond a mere exaggerated musical and visual pastiche of contemporary culture into a full illumination of the roles that concepts such as anonymity, total transparency, narcissism, 'meaninglessness' and self-celebritization play in social networking and Post-Internet communicative formats. As is argued below, social networking has become an extension of the psyche and emotions of those that utilise it on a regular basis (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014; Fisher, 2011), forming a platform on which the organic and 'real life' feelings of its users become increasingly entwined with their virtual selves. Social media no longer exists in a purely digital format, and is in fact a phenomenon that persistently 'stresses [...] out' a 'compulsive *Instagram*' generation that is 'constantly refreshing and liking and looking for content to share' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). This has impacted on the work of many Post-Internet musicians. I begin this section by providing an overview of the importance of the above concepts to discourses surrounding social media, before illuminating the experimental and critical ways that self-conscious musicians draw on

these developments to explore the role of authenticity in Post-Internet music and social networking.

It is important to briefly refer to the (im)balance between anonymity and transparency that has become a key element of Post-Internet culture more widely. Perhaps the most significant development in popular musical identity online has been the increasing weight placed on anonymity (Harper, July 2013; Woolgar, 2002; Gold, 2013). Anonymity and reclusiveness have, of course, long been significant within music and the arts more generally. For example, independent musicians such as Jandek and The Residents played with secrecy and mystery to excite and intrigue audiences during the late-twentieth century,²¹² while the mixes that drove 1990s rave culture were comprised of bootleg tracks from (often) unnamed artists.²¹³ Yet anonymity has continued to grow in prominence in Post-Internet popular culture. The ability of a web user to publicly obscure their identity online is well documented, and the extent to which this is the case is debated throughout academia on the subject (Woolgar, 2002; Gold, 2013). It is not uncommon for people to utilise multiple pseudonyms while commenting on blogs or connecting via social media. Avatars, the pictures that accompany these anonymous posts, allow users to visually represent themselves in any way they desire.²¹⁴ These developments have resulted in anonymity and pseudonyms becoming crucial aspects of Post-Internet existence.^{xvi} Yet much of the wider debate surrounding anonymity is centred on the key contradiction of supposed privacy and reclusiveness online: that of the hyper-surveillance culture of twenty-four hour media, narcissistic social networks, *Wikileaks* and, most crucially, the ease with which web users' actions can be 'tracked' and documented by governments and advertisers.²¹⁵ The assertion is that the corporate elements

²¹² This trend similarly aided the popularity of authors such as Thomas Pynchon and artists including Banksy.

²¹³ See Harper, July 2013; Keenan, 2014; Reynolds, 2013; Glaros and Laffey, 2012.

²¹⁴ This freedom, of course, lies within certain limitations of decency/legality (issues embraced by 18+, analysed in Section Eight).

²¹⁵ See Gold, 2013; and Dritsas, Gritzalis and Lambrinoudakis, 2006; as well as the interview with Holly Herndon conducted for this thesis (2014).

of the virtual plaza promote a facade of anonymity and privacy; with the aim of making its users feel comfortable enough to input their personal details into supposedly secure servers. In reality, there are few spaces online that are truly encrypted strongly enough to provide genuine secrecy (Gold, 2013; Dritsas, Gritzalis and Lambrinoudakis, 2006; Herndon, thesis interview, 2015). Also, the narcissism of social media²¹⁶ and the immediacy of search engines and digi-encyclopaedias such as *Google* and *Wikipedia*, fused with the ‘total transparency’ politics that motivate renowned information ‘traffickers’ such as *Wikileaks* (Khatchadourian, 2010), are catalysts for the development of a Post-Internet sentiment of ‘need-to-know’ entitlement and an omnivorousness for instantaneous information.²¹⁷ Twenty-four hour media outlets such as *Twitter* have become the locus of this culture, with international news stories now spreading globally almost instantaneously alongside the everyday musings of celebrities and the general public. This results in a significant juxtaposition: musicians have the potential to construct their public persona as one of anonymity and reclusiveness (although they cannot achieve absolute secrecy online), but audiences are simultaneously increasingly determined to search for as much information as possible regarding their favourite musicians. They now have the technology at their disposal to do so.²¹⁸ Indeed, the potential for pseudonyms, avatars and false profiles results in web users’ identities fluctuating and flowing from one ‘persona’ to the next, creating a crisis-of-self that provides material for many of the self-conscious artists analysed in this thesis.²¹⁹ This instability is amplified by the previously mentioned rise of a ‘need-to-know’ culture; an offshoot of information noise that further amplifies notions of over-exposure to cultural material and ideas. These are all issues that are reminiscent of the earlier discussion of ‘Post-Internet’ as a concept. Young social networkers, having spent their entire conscious lives

²¹⁶ This is a wide subject for academic debate, and is analysed in greater depth below.

²¹⁷ The abbreviation ‘FOMO’ (‘fear of missing out’) is frequently employed to describe this mentality/anxiety (Healy, May 2015; Anderson, 2011; Cohen, 2013; *BBC News*, 2015).

²¹⁸ For an interesting musical perspective on this, see Laurel Halo’s interview with Allan, November 2013.

²¹⁹ See Sections Seven, Eight and Nine.

engaging with these media, both inform and are informed by the virtual self-images they self-construct online.

The most significant issue caused by the tension between (on the one hand) anonymity and (on the other) ‘total transparency’ in relation to popular music culture is that of the construction of authenticity and being ‘true’ to ‘one’s self’ and ‘cultural experience’. Authenticity with regard to an artist’s public persona is connected to notions of ‘honesty’ and ‘stability’.²²⁰ As noted in Section Three, this persona must be seen ‘to represent the culture from which he [or she] comes’ (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, pp. 164–165), and the music that is formulated by an authentic musician is perceived to be a ‘direct expression of [the artist’s] innermost thoughts and emotions’ (Keightley, 2001, p. 135). As such, there are clear connections to be made between authenticity and self-representation, as an authentic artist provides the image of ‘unchanging musical “truth”’ (Frith, 1996, p. 40) with output that marks ‘out the genuine from the counterfeit, the honest from the false, the original from the copy, roots from surface, [...] feeling as against pretence’ (Middleton, 2006, p. 200). In other words, there is a clear relationship between the ascription of authenticity and an apparently honest and unfiltered expression of the ‘self’ by popular musicians. Yet these definitions of authenticity are somewhat limited in the context of a Post-Internet culture so oversaturated with information noise and reliant on malleable pseudonymic identities that it becomes increasingly difficult to retain a singular ‘true’ public persona. This instability has brought with it new ideas regarding identity generated by debates located in anonymity, hyper-transparency and narcissism. The artists investigated here, whose work effectively considers the contradictions and fluctuations of Post-Internet identity politics, provide a complex exploration of the potential impact that virtual reality has on its users. As with PC Music and its affiliates, these musicians’ fans recognise the ‘constructedness’ of the musicians’ personas

²²⁰ See Section Three.

and presentation of Post-Internet themes. Their self-consciousness does not render their output synthetic or inauthentic. Instead, there is perceived to be a genuine interest in examining the Post-Internet identities and lives of their audiences in their work, which consequently provides an honest and astute image of contemporary experience. These musicians draw on themes such as memetic sharing, anonymity, instantaneous media and information noise to form a Post-Internet analysis of public persona, identity and authenticity in the digital era. This grants them personas that may not be ‘honest’ or authentic in the traditionally recognised sense, but that are intrinsically representative of their own (and their audiences’) experiences in the contemporary world. This is a brand of authenticity informed by their expression of the ‘truth of’ *Post-Internet* ‘cultural experience’.

Social media holds a critical role in relation to anonymity, transparency, interactivity, narcissism and authenticity. Anonymity’s importance to debates about contemporary musical authenticity cannot be understated, and Harper explains that ‘anonymous or reclusive musicians are often held up as a heroic antithesis of commercial pop culture and its supposed excessive pre-occupation with image and the lives of its musicians’ (Harper, July 2013). In other words, artists that seek to remove themselves from public perception are able to attain a degree of authenticity and credibility. This anonymous presence seems to go against the mystical star texts of mainstream popular music, instead playing into the myth of the ‘amateur genius’ or ‘bedroom producer’ (Sinnreich, 2010, p. 122) who seems authentic to contemporary audiences as ‘we *all* have bedrooms, and [...] we are *all* producers to some extent. [The phrase “bedroom producer”] isn’t just a convenient rhetorical device – it’s *us*’ (ibid). Dubstep producer Burial is arguably the most ‘famously’ anonymous musician in contemporary music (Harper, July 2013). His music, while interesting in itself, seems to have taken on greater significance due to the authenticity afforded to his reclusive persona. Fisher astutely observes that

Burial's refusal to 'be a face', to constitute himself as a subject of the media's promotional machine, is [...] a resistance to the conditions of ubiquitous visibility and hyper-clarity imposed by digital culture. [...] 'It lets randoms in', he says of the Internet (Fisher, 2014, loc. 1520)

Burial's authenticity thus stems from the fact that he is deliberately retreating from the clichés of self-promotion that have become an established and inevitable aspect of online musical milieux. Yet the problem with granting such credence to anonymity is that many of the artists evincing this representational technique are doing so in the knowledge that it is widely deemed to be authentic and, as such, marketable. It is recognised that selecting a veiled identity generates audience intrigue, promoting mystery and lessening the possibility of waning interest (Harper, July 2013). As Finn Diesel notes,

Anonymity seems to obsess people in music. [...] Some musicians actually do want to remain anonymous, but generally make their image into even more of a spectacle. Therefore, I find it difficult to believe they genuinely desire a purer concept of music as ideas and sound over personalities (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015)

It is not overly surprising, then, that many of the artists that claim to be anonymous actually retain social media presences that grant them a public voice. Indeed, they use social networking to further stoke the fascination of their audience, contradictorily foregrounding their reclusiveness. Producer Zomby²²¹ is a notable example of this. His real name is not known publicly, he wears a mask when performing live, and his interviews with the media are often cryptic and guarded. Yet his *Twitter* account contains many expressions of personality, aggression and humour. He appears to reveal a lot of his supposedly hidden identity through his actions on this social media account, but retains an air of mystery and, thus, authenticity by continuing to hide his name and face due to the relationship between anonymity and the digital environment he inhabits.^{xvii}

Perhaps this is indicative of the juxtaposed importance that transparency also plays within music culture and social media more widely. One of the most critical shifts in

²²¹ Zomby is a contemporary club producer whose work is heavily inspired by that of Burial.

relationships between artists and their audiences has been the potential for expanded communication channels afforded by outlets such as *Twitter*. Murthy explains that *Twitter* 'is unique in facilitating interactions [between individuals and celebrities]. All discourse is public and its audience is not limited' (Murthy, 2013, p. 4). Murthy uses the hypothetical example of the ease with which a fan could send a public message to a successful mainstream artist such as Katy Perry and could, in theory, receive a reply from their idol (or at least engage with others with similar interests) (ibid). This also means that musicians are able to straightforwardly communicate with their fans, sending tweets with updates about their personal lives, releases and tour schedule on a regular and instantaneous basis. These conversational methods were certainly not as straightforward prior to the rise of *Twitter*, and this is one of the reasons for an increasing expectation for 'total transparency'. Although I have suggested that anonymity retains a strong relationship to web-based authenticity, there is also significant merit afforded to musicians that openly reach out to their audiences via social media. This is one of the key inconsistencies of representation, identity and authenticity within contemporary music: artists are expected to be elusive, mysterious and deliberately 'outside' of the star system, while simultaneously retaining a transparent and ever-present relationship with their social networking fan-base. This transparency is necessitated by the partial homogenisation²²² and potential for interactivity that networks such as *Twitter* promote. As Murthy explains,

Even if the influence of ordinary people on *Twitter* is minimal, the medium can potentially be democratizing in that it can be thought of as a megaphone that makes public the voices/conversations of any individual or entity. [...] Because the medium encourages association, users are already thinking of what hashtags to include in their messages, or who should be @-sign mentioned (Murthy, 2013, p. 31)

It is useful to make connections between the general democratisation noted here by Murthy and the unfolding of relationships between musicians and audiences on *Twitter*. In Section

²²² See Section Four.

Four I highlighted the importance of interactivity in music culture, emphasising the ways in which audiences have achieved some control over curatorial and distribution processes. This is indicative of the move toward an interactive conversational relationship between professional musicians and their fans brought about by social networking.^{xviii} Finn Diesel notes that by using social media – especially photographic exhibition platform *Instagram* – in a certain way, he feels that he is actually ‘creating [his] own original compositions’ for consumption by his audience (Finn Diesel, thesis interview, 2015). Musicians are deploying social networks as a creative device, rather than simply a promotional one. They see the potential to interact with their audience and stretch their art beyond the purely sonic. There are, of course, potential artistic problems with the interactive and hyper-transparent aspects of social networking. In this context, Holly Herndon notes that musicians preoccupied with social media ‘fall in danger of creating work that provokes the best response among their community online’ and could prove to be less substantial than work created in solitude (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). It could be suggested that the artists explored below are the products (or, perhaps, the victims) of this trend in that they have neglected to take the time to generate music with the same historical resonance as the twentieth century artists celebrated by retromanic critics in favour of maintaining constant and instantaneous ‘hype’ through a ceaseless release schedule and self-promotion campaign. However, as I argue, these techniques are both unavoidable and desirable (for fans) in the Post-Internet musical milieu. Regardless of how fleeting the popularity of this work may appear to be, its existence is justified by its self-conscious study of the role of social media in contemporary musical milieux. In drawing so extensively on the cultural experience of a generation preoccupied with social media, these musicians offer an authentic expression of Post-Internet issues.

The final, and perhaps most problematic, concept to consider in relation to social media’s role in Post-Internet music is that of narcissism. This issue gained wider prominence

with the publication of Twenge and Campbell's *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009), which asserts that the 'Internet phenomena'²²³ has generated a 'cultural change' (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 5) of 'self-admiration' and 'loving yourself' (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 9). Malikhao and Servaes refer to the post-millennial era as 'the age of narcissism' when considering the popularity of social media (Malikhao and Servaes, 2011), and it is therefore understandable that the majority of scholarly debate surrounding *Twitter* and *Facebook* has centred on the 'inflated self-view' of their users (Davenport, S. Bergman, J. Bergman and Fearington, 2014). These academics²²⁴ assert that those utilising these forms of media²²⁵ have become unavoidably narcissistic and self-obsessed, engaged 'in a variety of strategies aimed at bringing attention to themselves' (ibid). This is a result, according to Malikhao, of a key distinction from previous generations: their reliance on, and constant engagement with, digital technology (Malikhao, 2011). This correlation between Internet use and narcissism is informed by constant exposure to a 'mass media [that] emphasises self-expression, [...] the emphasis on celebrities in the media, the success of [...] social-networking sites, the uploading of personal videos on *YouTube*, *Twitter* [...] and blogging' (ibid). These are all supposedly phenomena that encourage self-absorption and endorse self-importance. This constant promotion of the self is amplified by the role of advertising online. When a social media user inputs their personal information into their account, corporate trackers are able to use this information to show adverts that are deemed suitable for that specific user.²²⁶ As such, social networkers begin to inadvertently participate in (and unintentionally self-generate) a customised virtual realm that is largely targeted at their tastes. The name of mid-2000s social networking site *MySpace* was remarkably prophetic in light of

²²³ By which they mean elements such as the rise of social media, 'selfies' and individually tailored advertising.

²²⁴ See also Leung, 2013; Marcus, Machilek and Schütz, 2006; Levitin, 2014; Scott, 2015; and Carr, 2011.

²²⁵ The largest percentage of web users comprises 'teenagers, college students [and] young adults' (Davenport, S. Bergman, J. Bergman and Fearington, 2014).

²²⁶ This is referred to in the discussions of the virtual plaza in Section Two and Section Five.

these developments: web users are increasingly contributing to the construction of a ‘space’ based on their interests.

It is no surprise that narcissism and self-celebritization are becoming central aspects of Post-Internet culture, given the increasing regularity with which impressionable youths use these forms of media and are surrounded by images and products that promote *themselves* (ibid). Narcissism is incarnated in self-serving updates on social media; the dominance of selfies;²²⁷ the preoccupation with social status improvements such as extra *Facebook* friends or retweets; and an escalating trend toward ‘trolling’.²²⁸ Indeed, narcissism and social media are so strongly connected that web users often seem to utilise their *Facebook* timelines and *Twitter* newsfeeds as a prosthetic extension of their own identity, channelling their emotions and neuroses through these mediums and subsequently acting differently in their ‘real’ lives as a result of these connections. Reflecting on this point, Jurgenson relates that

Thoughts, ideas, locations, photos, identities, friendships, memories, politics, and almost everything else are finding their way to social media. [The] logic of the sites has burrowed far into our consciousness. Smartphones and their symbiotic social media give us a surfeit of options to tell the truth about who we are and what we are doing, and an audience for it all, reshaping norms around mass exhibitionism and voyeurism. *Twitter* lips and *Instagram* eyes: social media is part of ourselves; the *Facebook* source code becomes our own code (Jurgenson, 2012)

Jurgenson is observing that there is little – even no – distinction between the identities of Post-Internet users online or offline, with each informing the other constantly and generating pressures to act in specific ways in both virtual and physical environments. This mirrors the thoughts of Fisher (2011), who asserts that the ubiquity of smartphones and tablets, alongside the instantaneous nature of communicative systems such as emailing and social networking, has resulted in a generation that is increasingly preoccupied with – and, in turn, controlled by – its technological devices.²²⁹ ^{xix} This narcissistic connection between the Post-Internet

²²⁷ See Section Two.

²²⁸ ‘Trolling’ is a media term for supposedly ironic but increasingly extreme examples of cyber-bullying.

²²⁹ This posthuman idea is explored more thoroughly in the next two sections of this thesis, but it has also inspired the ‘*Twitter* feed of non-sequitur “word sculptures”’ of Post-Internet conceptual artists such as Spencer

generation and its technology is not always necessarily a negative phenomenon, however.

ADR believes that

It's hard to imagine what [identity] really was before the Internet. Before carefully curated streams of images and bits of text constituted a person or group's self-created context. I find it difficult to evaluate or even experience the artistic identity of a cultural author without the ability to scroll through their assemblage of aesthetic units; their artistic content itself is without context when not linked to a network and expanded into on-going streams (ADR, thesis interview, 2015)

Effectively, ADR believes that social media's promotion of narcissism has become such a critical aspect of contemporary culture that it actually has a significant impact on the ways in which a musician's output can be read.^{xx} The musicians addressed below all evoke this shift self-consciously in their public personas. Indeed, it is not just the fact that social media impacts on the 'real world' that is critical to these Post-Internet approaches to digital identity politics. The reverse is also true, as 'real life' activities inform the construction of social networks and the personas presented on them. As Jurgenson notes,

Facebook doesn't curtail the offline but depends on it. What is most crucial to our time spent logged on is what happened when logged off; it is the fuel that runs the engine of social media. The photos posted, the opinions expressed, the check-ins that fill our streams are often anchored by what happens when disconnected and logged-off. [...] It's not real unless it's on *Google*; pics or it didn't happen. We aren't friends until we are *Facebook* friends. We have come to understand more and more of our lives through the logic of digital connection. Social media is more than something we log into; it is something we carry within us. We can't log off (Jurgenson, 2012)

Social media is now an everyday aspect of existence and identity. It informs the way that people act in the physical world, and these activities correspondingly shape the development of these social networks.

Social media is thus a key aspect of the shift from an 'Internet' to a 'Post-Internet' mentality, and it is a critical element of music culture specifically due to the importance these networks place on anonymity and communication. I now explore several musicians whose sounds, visual styles and personas draw on the fluctuations between anonymity, mystery,

Longo (Brown, April 2015, p. 39). His art is preoccupied with 'the banal details of our online habits'; with the unfocused and abstract nature of his tweets echoing unfiltered and oversaturated digital timelines and newsfeeds (ibid) (see Figure 38). This is also noted in the work of James Ferraro and Lil B analysed below.

total transparency, interactivity and narcissism online. The musicians analysed here are self-conscious in their critique of social media's impact on the Post-Internet generation.²³⁰ These artists have what Reynolds calls 'a kind of splayed sensibility, an artistic self that is diffuse and centre-less' (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 34), which is evocative of the mutable relationship between anonymity and transparency within Post-Internet culture. Indeed, in reference to James Ferraro, Adam Harper suggested that musicians now 'seem to extend their "art" into their *Twitter* accounts, like a modern-day Gilbert and George. [...] It's always a performance, just more or less obviously so' (Harper, thesis interview, 2012). As producer M.E.S.H. has argued,

There is a visual and sonic language that you can only understand if you follow [these musicians], see the images [they] post, hear what [they] DJ. [It is] more than the sum of its parts. It's in [their] selfies and one-liners on social media as much as in [their] music. [...] It's definitely a language that might or might not read in a fragmented form. As in, it's an ephemeral, feed-based practice that needs that context (quoted in Iadorola, March 2015)

In other words, artists who self-consciously engage with the Post-Internet condition must accept the fact that their music can no longer be isolated thematically or aesthetically from their social networking presence. Central to these ideas is the rapper Lil B, an 'Internet celebrity' with a 'multifaceted persona [that] subverts, or creatively perverts' traditional forms of representation (Blanning, February 2012, p. 45). His self-conscious and exaggeratedly narcissistic presence on *MySpace*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* granted him his online success, and as such he holds a seminal position within these debates surrounding the need to expose every personal detail to eager audiences. While Lil B does not explore the notion of anonymity directly,²³¹ he is a crucial example of narcissism and total transparency being taken to extremes by a Post-Internet musician. Marantz argues that 'Lil B performs superficiality', and that his stream-of-conscious rap style has come to be a 'form of culture

²³⁰ They therefore share much in common with the ironic pastiche of artists illuminated in the previous section.

²³¹ Examinations of anonymity/mystery are found in the analyses of James Ferraro and Hype Williams below.

jamming [and] a comment on the mechanization of celebrity' in the digital age (Marantz, April 2012). His success has been almost entirely due to his exploitation of the web and social media, and he celebrates this frequently (see Figure 39). At the time of Marantz's article in April 2012, Lil B had 'more than a hundred *MySpace* accounts, four hundred thousand *Twitter* followers, and sixty million *YouTube* views' (ibid). In the several years since, his followers and views have more than doubled. This is very unusual for an artist with practically no public presence outside of the digital realm. His videos do not circulate on television, he receives very little radio play, and he is not signed to a major label. *YouTube* is a platform that Lil B has exploited throughout his music career, and one that has 'nurtur[ed] his own narcissism' (Blanning, February 2012, p. 46). His visual identity – which mirrors his stream-of-conscious rapping – has cemented his role as a key figure in the exploration of the Post-Internet. His *YouTube* channel, lilbpack1, features hundreds of videos, most of which centre on him rapping spontaneously over various sounds and beats. The magnitude of the video collection is a crucial part of Lil B's engagement with Post-Internet culture. As stated in Section One, retromanic critics have argued that quantity is often favoured over quality in an environment that allows infinite access to cultural material from any time or place. By producing so many clips and uploading them in such quick succession, the rapper is mirroring the requirement for total transparency outlined above. This can also be seen in his prolific musical output, which has involved the release of multiple vast mixtapes often comprised of over six hundred tracks (Marantz, April 2012). The release of a Lil B music video is not an 'event' for fans to get excited about. It is, in essence, an everyday occurrence, with the clips becoming more like a continuous narcissistic video diary documenting Lil B's life and musical explorations.²³²

²³² This is redolent of the fact that social media has become a tool for the Post-Internet generation to do the same.

Furthermore, many of Lil B's tracks and videos display amateurish hip-hop flow and cadence, and he has been criticised in hip-hop circles for his apparent lack of 'conventional' rap virtuosity. This disapproval is based on the fact that

Most of his songs are freestyles [and] when he fails to think of a clever rhyme, which is often, he revels in the awkward silence, or shouts an incongruous phrase. [...] Even his flow is jarring: he stubbornly refuses to stay in the pocket, missing downbeats and erupting in non-verbal tics (ibid)

However, on closer inspection it is clear that Lil B's free vocal style is at the centre of the 'superficiality' that he is performing. He is again imitating the flow of information online – he represents 'everything, man. The Internet. This shit is crazy' (Lil B, quoted in Marantz, April 2012) – by embodying a '#nofilter' approach to lyricism and outpourings of public emotion/information (Cliff, December 2013). The hashtag '#nofilter' accompanies *Instagram* images that are unedited, referring to the ability to 'filter' pictures through a selection of digital effects. Lil B's all-encompassing #nofilter style exposes a tendency toward decontextualised ideas, multiple personas and total transparency throughout social media networks. The information noise that comprises Lil B's torrent of ideas and spur-of-the-moment freestyles is reminiscent of the web's constant flow of cultural material; much of which is not 'worthwhile' or 'filtered'. Lil B takes this study of total transparency into a critique of its relationship to narcissism in the Post-Internet era. His #nofilter approach to lyrical composition and musical distribution is expanded on in his stream-of-conscious *Twitter* account, which retains a similar reliance on spur-of-the-moment thoughts and comments. His tweets often appear wilfully nonsensical or flippant, aligning the #nofilter style of his music with his uncensored online identity (see Figure 40). Additionally, his exaggerated and self-absorbed #basedgod persona is a distortedly narcissistic subversion of more conventional star constructions. He self-consciously commands his followers to adhere to his every word and to live a 'based' life in his image. He posts numerous selfies to his profile, bragging about his sexual prowess and declaring himself to be, as his nickname

suggests, a ‘god’. While on the surface this appears to be a typical example of the traditional separatist relationship between stars and their fans (with Lil B as an otherworldly deific figure and his fans as mere subjects), the incessant and histrionic nature of his self-promotion actually has the opposite effect and encourages his audience to feel like they are in on the subversive ‘joke’. Lil B’s persona is the ultimate expression of the narcissism of social networking. His predominantly teenage Post-Internet fans are incapable of separating their physical lives from their engagement with virtual media such as selfies, reality television and retweets, each of which promotes self-celebritization and the notion of ‘fifteen minutes of fame’. Lil B re-presents these cultural values back to his followers.²³³ He portrays himself as being entirely individualised, a celebrity in his own right, and even a deity that should be worshipped by his fan-base. Yet in actuality he maintains a contradictorily close relationship with his fans through this engagement with social media. His stream-of-conscious style reveals aspects of his personal life that very few artists with similar (or greater) visibility publicise, and he communicates with his followers far more intimately and regularly than other users with rival follower accounts. This grants him a reputation for being transparent (and thus authentically representative of the open nature of information dispersal on social networks), while the bloated image of the #basedgod persona is so distorted and theatrical that his fans are rarely in doubt about the fact that it is a deliberate critique of the narcissism of post-millennial youths. He is preoccupied with both interacting with his fans and granting them temporary celebrity status, frequently retweeting followers and exposing them to his vast audience.^{xxi}

Lil B’s narcissism, and the fact that he encourages the same self-absorption from his audiences, is a crucial (and, given its hyperbolic nature, self-conscious) illustration of the roles that narcissistic social networking, self-celebritization and star/fan interactivity play

²³³ This was further displayed in his crude insertion of his own image into the now-infamous 2014 *Academy Awards* celebrity selfie taken by Ellen DeGeneres (Figure 41).

within discourses of authenticity in contemporary music. For Lil B, there is nothing uncomfortable about creating deeply personal raps²³⁴ and offering unique insights into his own life.²³⁵ He collapses the distinction between star and audience by letting his fans know every facet of his world, and his #nofilter ‘video diary’ lyrical and social networking style is indicative of this. Fans see Lil B from every possible angle in every possible scenario (Figure 42).²³⁶ At the same time, however, Lil B openly mocks the idea of celebritization and name-dropping in popular music. As Marantz elucidates,

One of his songs is called ‘I’m Miley Cyrus’ and it goes like this: ‘I’m Miley Cyrus/I’m Miley Cyrus/Cyrus/Cyrus/I’m Miley Cyrus’. Another song, called ‘Mel Gibson’ goes like this: ‘I look like Mel Gibson/I’m Mel Gibson... Oh my god, I’m Mel Gibson’. [...] There is one called ‘Justin Bieber’, one called ‘Paris Hilton’, one called ‘Bill Clinton’ and one called ‘Dr. Phil’ (Marantz, April 2012)

There are many more examples of this apparently meaningless use of celebrity titles for his tracks. Lil B is mocking the prominence of these celebrities in everyday culture and drawing attention to the emptiness of their public personas by repeating their names until they lose all meaning or context.²³⁷ While Lil B reveals every detail of his own life, he is highlighting how little audiences know about the real lives of those celebrities whose names they use daily. There is a parodic element to this, of course, and the absence of sincerity or virtuosity in many Lil B songs may garner him a reputation for hollowness and distancing similar to that of PC Music. Yet his clear interest in surveying the impact of social media on his Post-Internet fan-base, as well as his exposure of the vacuity of social networking’s self-celebritization, renders him authentic to the experiences of his audience who arguably see an honest and critically engaged evocation of their own existences online.

Further examples of this self-conscious approach to social networking are located in the work of James Ferraro, who is a deliberately provocative musician intrigued by the role of

²³⁴ See, for example, 2012’s ‘Mom Stressed Out’, 2011’s ‘I Still Can’t Sleep’, etc.

²³⁵ See, for example, the video ‘Kanye West post a tweet with Lil B #6 top *Twitter* artist!’ from 2010.

²³⁶ He even appears in self-produced television commercials (Gordon, March 2014).

²³⁷ Of course, similarities can be drawn here with the ironic imagery employed by #HDBOYZ and PC Music.

the media in contemporary music.²³⁸ He plays with anonymity and the ability to hide his ‘real-life’ identity while simultaneously constructing multiple ‘transparent’ personas online to confuse and intrigue his audiences. His ever-changing usernames on *Twitter* and *SoundCloud*²³⁹ suggest an identity-in-flux,²⁴⁰ but they are also pranks, designed to confuse his fans and lead them to seek answers to mysteries that do not exist.²⁴¹ Ferraro is clearly inspired somewhat by memes such as one of the most-followed non-celebrity accounts on *Twitter*, @Horse_ebooks (Figure 43). With over 200,000 followers, the account gained notoriety due to the abstract nature of its tweeting. For the majority of its existence it was assumed that the account was an ‘unpersuasive spambot’ (Harper, July 2013), designed initially to market e-books to *Twitter* users before somehow becoming corrupted and instead issuing an ‘endlessly spewing spoor’ (Reynolds, June 2011, p. 34) of nonsensical phrases and words. Its popularity sprouted from the mystery surrounding the account, and it is a highly visible example of anonymity and opacity breeding curiosity in a Post-Internet world. However, in September 2013, it was revealed that the account was in fact being controlled by humans, and was one of many ‘conceptual-art pieces’ by Jacob Bakkila and Thomas Bender (Orlean, September 2013). Their artworks play on the notion of anonymity, obscuring the identity of their creator while also attempting to expose social media users’ interest in the uncanny nature of artificial intelligence.²⁴² Producer Evian Christ emphasised how much these surreal social networking accounts are exploited in the work of Post-Internet musicians in his interview for this thesis:

I am obsessed with certain aspects of [social media] which generally have nothing to do with my career as a musician. I like to retweet a lot of surreal stuff pumped out by big corporations with misinformed social media departments. And I like to find fake accounts with essentially no followers that tweet endlessly banal things into a total void [and] fake celebrity accounts (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015)

²³⁸ This was mentioned in the previous section in relation to Ferraro’s contributions to vaporwave.

²³⁹ E.g. Bodyguard, Bebetune\$, LIL_ICEBUNNY, Obama Glo, suki_girlz, etc.

²⁴⁰ This concept is drawn on in more depth in the next three sections.

²⁴¹ For more on this approach to musical pseudonyms, see Hofer, 2006.

²⁴² These are themes that recur in Sections Seven and Eight.

Following these thematic tendencies, James Ferraro maintains ‘a strange *Twitter* feed comprised of aphorisms like “liquid metal jogging suits” and “ANGELS WITH TONGUE RINGS”’ (RBMA, 2012); phrases that are essentially meaningless, but provoke a fan-led search for deeper connotations and hidden messages (Figure 44). The use of apparently random numbers, emojis²⁴³ and symbols in tweets further mystifies his timeline, despite their deliberate lack of substance or meaning. This all self-consciously deconstructs the myths surrounding anonymity, while simultaneously reflecting slogan culture and the proliferation of images online. In other words, the *Twitter* feed of Ferraro is a meditation on the impact of information noise, echoing the meaninglessness of the oversaturation of images, identities and news that web users experience on a daily basis, while concurrently playing on the unique balance between self-promotion and self-mystification that dominates contemporary music milieux. Moreover, Ferraro seems to believe that the lack of a filter on social media, and those networks’ intrinsic connections to the psyches of those of a Post-Internet generation, has decimated the possibility for ‘real’ emotional comprehension in the physical world. The digital environment has dismantled Post-Internet human experience, to the extent that web users are only pretending to be fully organic beings.²⁴⁴ His 2013 video ‘NYC, HELL 3:00AM (OFFICIAL TRAILER #2)’ features amateur documentary footage of a car crash looped and distorted until it is emptied of all affecting resonance, ultimately becoming just another digital image devoid of context.^{xxii} The capacity to lose one’s self in virtual identities has, according to Ferraro, resulted in an inability to comprehend the difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘digital’.²⁴⁵ He believes that Post-Internet web users cannot distinguish between that which ‘matters’ and that which is detritus due to increasing pressure

²⁴³ Emojis are increasingly ubiquitous icons and symbols used by social networkers to signify emotions or feelings, with the most frequently utilised being ‘☺’ and ‘☹’. ‘Emoji’ has subsequently become referred to as a new form of language, universally understood by and definitive of the Post-Internet generation (Doble, 2015; Cooper, 2015; Schwartz, 2015; Howse, 2015; Brand, 2015).

²⁴⁴ This is a theme that recurs in Section Seven and Section Eight.

²⁴⁵ This is reminiscent of the work of Nathan Jurgenson (2012; 2014).

from so many different social networking sources. This is a theme that impels the critiques of Reynolds, Morley and Fisher.

James Ferraro's prankster-like critique of information noise culture and the 'trash' (Iadorola, July 2014) that it generates stretches beyond his social media account and into his public persona as a whole. He collaborates with *DIS*, sharing a mutual interest in the 'trash' and detritus of web culture. The contemporary definition of trash no longer takes the form of

physical, tangible things like sewage, oil spills and eggshells. [Trash] is unsubstantial, uncarefully produced, and evasive of comprehension. [It is] the endless stream of data, so much of it dust in the ether. [...] It is uncannily, almost unobservably everywhere (ibid)

'Trash', a term that Ferraro often adopts in interviews (*RBMA*, 2012; Gibb, December 2011), thus holds a similar meaning to that of information noise. Ferraro's experiments with identity embrace the juxtaposition between anonymous mystery and 'total transparency' to examine the impact of the 'trash' that pervades the lives of web users. His use of multiple personas, for instance, references the crisis-of-the-self generated by pseudonymic social media culture. Ferraro is questioning the morality and psychosis behind an individual taking on the identity of someone else²⁴⁶ – whether that new identity is a real person or a fantasy figure – by assuming multiple identities himself. One of his *SoundCloud* pseudonyms, user703918785, is deliberately anonymous and devoid of self-representation in homage to the Internet's potential as a palette for experiments with identity. This is 'a variation on the generic username[s] of spambots' (Iadorola, July 2014) and again evocative of @Horse_ebooks. Ferraro is making connections between supposedly fake automated identities and those in the real world. As he states in his interview with Gibb,

People are essentially wearing the Internet, eating it, hearing it, talking about it all the time, because everything is like a symptom of an Internet driven society. [...] It's this weird impressionism that everything embodies. I think there will be more and more artwork resembling this. Digital clarity has given us another perspective on humanism (Ferraro, quoted in Gibb, December 2011)

²⁴⁶ This is a key issue in the work of 18+ (see Section Eight).

He observes that the Internet contributes as many ‘identities’ to its users as they do to it, and suggests that the Post-Internet generation views the world differently to prior generations due to their ‘digital clarity’. This again evokes the Post-Internet ideas contemplated throughout this thesis and emphasised by Jurgenson (2012; 2014), particularly in his assertion that people are ‘wearing’, ‘eating’ and ‘hearing’ the Internet in their everyday lives. The real and virtual are no longer distinct, with the result that meaningful and organic cultural events are inseparable from the digital ‘trash’ that surrounds people at all times. His albums, social media accounts, videos and personas take in all of the trash saturating the web, deliberately focusing on its most garish and extreme aspects such as advertising, violence and pornography, and repackage it to his fans in uncomfortably distorted and unstable personas. Ferraro’s work with social media, and his employment of a hyperactive visual style contrasting multiple jarring images (see Figure 45), moves the Post-Internet audience’s ‘gaze to the technology of the present’, utilising ‘of-the-moment tools to create something “totally devoid of human spirit”, like a digi-utopia and dystopia at the same time’ (Cooper, Friedlander and Saxelby, September 2013). He is interested in the ‘copacetic co-existence of man and machine’ (ibid) that is indicative of the Post-Internet condition more generally.²⁴⁷ While the real James Ferraro remains mysterious, hiding behind his many masks, his online representations mirror contemporary identity, reminding his audience of the effects of information noise and the issues surrounding anonymity and total transparency. In the same way that Lil B’s self-consciousness is appreciated and thus authenticated by his audience, so too is James Ferraro’s critique of their condition.

Hype Williams, comprised of Dean Blunt and Inga Copeland, play with the juxtaposition between anonymity and total transparency through an instinctive understanding (and subversion) of channels of communication and influence online that has resulted in a

²⁴⁷ This is returned to fully in the next chapter.

critique that arguably even outdoes those of Lil B and Ferraro. Their manipulation of contemporary media provides one of the most powerful (and confusing) studies of identity, anonymity and celebrity in post-millennial music. Their entire public representation is built on mystification, humour and lies, with one interview in *The Guardian* bearing the title ‘Hype Williams: Do they ever speak the truth?’ (Beaumont-Thomas, April 2012). That particular interview offers a few examples of the distortions generated by Blunt and Copeland, with the duo claiming

that they released music by putting USB sticks in apples and selling them in Brixton market. That they’re mates with New York rapper Cam’ron. That Inga recently tried out for Arsenal’s women’s team. That Dean was caught robbing raccoons from taxidermists and joined the Nation of Islam (ibid)

Whether any, all or none of these stories are true is trivial (beyond fan intrigue). What is important is that the duo is simultaneously embracing the mysteries of online anonymity while playing with the side effect of a culture of ‘total transparency’: that of the Post-Internet public’s apparent need to find out as much as possible. Their preoccupation with critiquing celebrity culture can be found in Photoshopped publicity shots of the duo ‘lurking in the background of the infamous 1997 meeting between Tony Blair and Noel Gallagher’ (ibid) or appearing alongside R&B star Drake (Figures 46 and 47). Here, again, are themes that have previously been located in the work of #HDBOYZ, Lil B, James Ferraro and PC Music. Hype Williams claim to be an ‘art project’ developed by a curator named Denna Frances Glass (ibid), and all of the duo’s official news comes from an email account that uses that name. Yet Glass is another mystery and has never been available to comment in person, leading to the suggestion that this is further obfuscation on the part of Blunt and Copeland.²⁴⁸ It is clear that this is a similar critique of ‘trash’ and information noise to that of Ferraro. Both sets of artists believe that the Post-Internet generation is so saturated with news and media that it is

²⁴⁸ The name ‘Hype Williams’, incidentally, is copied from that of a famous hip-hop music video director, leading to confusion among fans searching for his work online.

incapable of distinguishing between reality and fantasy, or between what is important and what is disposable. The group's sonic and visual style is an 'unstable, fragmentary, mocking-yet-deadly-serious schizo-aesthetic' (Finlayson, May 2012) that echoes their inconsistent personas. Musically, they pastiche and sample from sources as diverse and disconnected as Sade, Gwen Stefani, black metal, dub, Britney Spears and the *Pokémon* theme song, while the muddled production and overly synthetic sound that permeates their tracks is a deliberate and self-conscious amplification of their own obfuscated and falsified identities. Their *YouTube* channel is named pollyjacobsen, after 'one of the band's many conduits/identities depending who you ask' (*Dummy*, December 2012), and their videos are abstract and surreal. The majority of the clips feature short, low-bitrate snippets of tracks from Hype Williams' albums juxtaposed with avant-garde digital imagery from a substantial variety of sources, all labelled with similarly irreverent and unusual titles. The 2010 video for 'rescue dawn II (i am wiger toods)' is entirely comprised of a slowed-down, almost pornographic visual sample of Britney Spears' 2003 hit 'Everytime', while the 'stalker' series of videos features the artists staring blank-faced out of the screen while a looped voice sings 'I've been watching you' (Figure 48). These clips could be said to provide an aggressive critique of the hyper-surveillance culture that surrounds the notion of total transparency. Yet, given the lack of context provided, it is also possible that they are deliberately devoid of discernible meaning for the same provocative reasons as the *Twitter* accounts of Ferraro. Finlayson asserts that, having experienced their provocations and distortions so frequently, 'we should have accepted by now that asking "why?" is a fruitless exercise' (Finlayson, May 2012), and it is probable that the vacuous images that they generate are a replication of the oversaturation of information noise culture. This may be a reaction to the arguments of retromanic critics, who have asserted that the post-millennial generation has yet to produce any 'music that actually *matters*' (Reynolds, 2011, p. 172). If there is no meaning to be located in the work of Hype

Williams, then is does not ‘matter’ ideologically in comparison with, say, the celebrated subcultural musicians of the late-twentieth century. I would argue that this is a one-dimensional reading of and approach to musical production in the Post-Internet era,²⁴⁹ but it does seem to be a theme of Hype Williams’ work.^{xxiii}

These themes can also be located in the duo’s use of social media more specifically. Considering their work alongside that of comparably mysterious associate Actress,²⁵⁰ Lauren Martin suggests that there is self-consciousness about the way

they treat the release of their music online. Actress drops bundles of teaser tracks via his *Twitter* account at random through *Sendspace* links and *SoundCloud* accounts, which are deleted as quickly as they are uploaded. Bar a tweet or two little is said about them and if you’ve got them, great, but you probably won’t find them getting released officially. Dean Blunt and Inga Copeland do similar exercises while taking their own brand of self-referential ambiguity to an extreme. [...] What [is left is] a collection of snapshots that mirror the personas Actress and Hype Williams have cultivated for themselves; personas as impulsive, daring minds who aren’t afraid to bend the rules surrounding form (Martin, July 2014)

She goes on to underline the ‘flippant’ nature of these releases and the ‘ironically both meticulously planned out and random’ style that defines their public personas (ibid), which further amplifies the self-conscious nature of ‘meaninglessness’ in their output. Analogous techniques mark Hype Williams’ deliberately opaque live shows (Figure 49):

At one gig [in 2011], with the stage clogged in smoke and strobes, a teenage boy ran on a treadmill while a man in a disturbing rubber mask and Arsenal kit lurked on top of the speaker stacks. Blunt and Copeland were pale outlines, divining bass that was so strong it physically assaulted the audience, and the show ended on a constant loop of chesty coughing. It was both silly and deadly serious, and powerful because it was meaningless (Beaumont-Thomas, April 2012)

As such, there are two definitive themes that recur throughout the music, visual style, performances and personas of the duo: first, a Post-Internet attack on meaning that highlights the impact of information noise on web users’ ability to distinguish between that which is useful and that which is ‘trash’; and second, obfuscation that mirrors the on-going

²⁴⁹ The work of musicians outlined in the remaining sections of the thesis amplifies this.

²⁵⁰ Actress’ name is a deliberate reference to playful gender identity. His album *Ghettoville* was accompanied with a press release self-reflexively describing his self-constructed public persona as ‘the Actress image’ (Werkdiscs, 2014).

juxtaposition between anonymity and transparency online. As Beaumont-Thomas suggests, Blunt and Copeland ‘have cried wolf so many times that nobody knows what’s real any more – but instead of wanting to ignore them, our fascination only increases’ (ibid). Bick asserts that there is a trend throughout the duo’s work toward critiquing ‘the demand for constant self-policing and image display of selfie culture, and the demands for oversharing and confessionalism that come with social media personal branding’ (Bick, March 2015). They are ‘pok[ing] at bored narcissism’, generating music, lyrics and personas that are ‘bland platitudes reminiscent of thousands of inane *Instagram* posts and *Pinterest* pins’ (ibid). In a comparable methodology to that of Ferraro, the duo simultaneously personifies and critiques the supposed inability to distinguish between what is meaningful and what is unimportant in contemporary culture, mocking their Post-Internet audience’s apparent ‘desperate calls to be looked at’ (ibid).^{xxiv}

To conclude, it appears that there is a belief among these musicians that the very idea of ‘meaningfulness’ is flawed in a Post-Internet world overwhelmed by the consequences of information noise. This provides something of a riposte to the lament of writers such as Reynolds, who are critical of the absence online of ‘music that actually *matters*’ (Reynolds, 2011, p. 172). As Ferraro in particular would suggest, this is irreconcilable terminology for addressing ‘worth’ in a culture that cannot separate self-centred virtual events from significant real-world issues. Both the online and the offline do/do not matter just as much as one another. The identities of Hype Williams and Ferraro are designed to amplify, and perhaps even celebrate, the fact that making distinctions about the quality of cultural material does not (and perhaps should not) ‘matter’ like it did prior to a Post-Internet context of data smog. As I have suggested above, I do not entirely endorse this hypercritical (almost prankster-esque) theme. It mirrors Harper’s concerns illuminated in the previous section regarding the prominence of musical styles that ultimately legitimise the negativity of

Reynolds, Fisher and Morley. The artists that are explored latterly in this thesis are profoundly engaged with making music that, for them, genuinely evokes and expresses the complexities of identity online. There is, in their view, an authentic meaning to be located in their work. This does not negate the techniques of Lil B, James Ferraro and Hype Williams, however, who offer an intriguing and complex critique of notions such as narcissism, anonymity, total transparency and meaningfulness through the prism of self-conscious social networking accounts on *Twitter* and *YouTube* specifically. According to these artists, the Post-Internet generational inability to separate the physical and the virtual has affected self-representation, communication, interactivity and, indeed, moral judgments. Audiences are able to locate an astute echo of their own social networking experiences in the output of these musicians. The remainder of this thesis takes these ideas further, albeit by focusing on apparently more ‘serious’ attempts by artists to fully personify and represent the impact that contemporary technology has on identity.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Popular music & Post-Internet identity*

Chapter 4 – Section 7: Digital queering and personal posthumanism

[For these artists], ‘mutant’ and ‘alien’ [...] serve as a positive identification, introduction, and celebration of difference. [...] So much [online music] has in its weird and futuristic qualities [...] cultivated a general queerness (Harper, 9 January 2014)

There isn’t a person and then an avatar, a real world and then an Internet. They’re merged. As theorists like Katherine Hayles have long taught, technology, society, and the self have always been intertwined (Jurgenson, 2014)

In the remaining sections of the thesis, I move away from the ironic and hypercritical posturing of artists analysed previously to investigate the music, imagery and representational politics of musicians whose personas have been shaped by the Post-Internet condition. These musicians evoke authentic representations of contemporary cultural experience through their evincing of clear elements of Post-Internet identity. A large amount of academic writing is dedicated to both queer theory and the effects of digital technology on its users, and the musicians addressed throughout this section exhibit aspects of these two concepts. As was confirmed during interviews with many of these artists, the fluidity that demarcates both of these bodies of work has motivated musicians whose public personas express the mutability of identity in Post-Internet culture, generating an aesthetic that I label ‘digital queer’. This is a neologism generated from the combination of both cybernetic posthumanism and queer gender politics. This section is in three parts, beginning with an engagement with key texts on queer theory and posthumanism. I draw on seminal work from both fields²⁵¹ to define critical terms such as ‘cyborgism’ and to provide a critical context for the work of these artists. This overview of these two critical ideas (particularly posthumanism) again evokes the ever-decreasing distinction between the organic and the virtual that exemplifies the Post-Internet condition. The second part introduces the style of ‘digital queer’, illuminating the parallels between these two bodies of post-structuralist academic work while explaining the

²⁵¹ I analyse works by Butler (1988; 1990); De Lauretis (1991); Berlant and Warner (1995); Haraway (1991); Hayles (1999); and Loza (2001).

importance that *DIS Magazine* and Ryan Trecartin have held within the construction of this thematic trend. I conclude by analysing the musicians themselves, investigating the fusion of fluctuating genders and cyborgian posthumanism that is critical to the work of Mykki Blanco, Kelela and Arca.

Queer theory and posthuman theory are separate bodies of academic work, but my analysis of both draws connections between them to expose their relationship to the resultant ‘digital queer’ identity politics that have emerged in Post-Internet culture. This is crucial given that, as noted throughout this and the next section, many musicians exhibiting this trend have acknowledged their indebtedness to theorists such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles.²⁵² This is not a full history of the fields, as much of their subject matter is beyond the remit of this thesis, but the texts that are addressed here provide a useful outline of the concepts involved. Queer, initially a homophobic term used to insult LGBTQ communities, was accepted into academic discourse following the publication of several influential texts by Judith Butler (1988; 1990). Butler’s writings primarily discuss feminism in relation to theatre studies, but they are informed by the idea that gender is constructed, performed and fluctuating. As Butler explains, ‘gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts precede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*’ (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Gender is not a prescriptive ‘model of identity’ that defines a person’s actions or feelings from birth. It does not necessarily equate to biological sex. Gender is, instead, a personally selected or socially ascribed performance of identity that is malleable and related to ‘social temporality’ (Butler, 1988, p. 520): where the person is, whom they are with, what they are doing, etc. A person ‘selects’ their gender by electing to wear a particular costume, both literal (as in their choice of clothes/hairstyle) and metaphorical (as in their ‘performance’:

²⁵² See, for instance, Arca, thesis interview, 2015; and Herndon, thesis interview, 2014.

tastes, actions, vocal cadence, sexuality, etc.). These costumes are inhabited and shed on a regular basis throughout one's life. This means that structuralist heteronormative definitions of gender – male versus female, homosexual versus heterosexual, etc. – are ultimately flawed in their limited binary outlook. Butler's work, as stated, relates specifically to feminism and investigates the role of gender politics in the representation of women. There is little in her early writing that refers to the term 'queer', but the concepts that would come to be debated in queer theory can be traced back to these ideas. 'Queer' was reappropriated from its earlier homophobic context by Teresa De Lauretis in a special 1991 edition of the journal *Differences* subtitled 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities'. Queer theory, according to Turner, was initiated as a school of thought in reaction to the dominance of 'white, middle-class' men in academic discussions of gender, with one issue being that gay men's rights received more publicity than writing by/about cis women, lesbians, transgenders, bisexuals or minority racial groups (Turner, 2000, p. 107). Its key figures, including De Lauretis and Sedgwick, raised questions such as

How does the representability of gender and sexuality in the larger culture influence the political representations of women sexual minorities? [...] How do those representations influence the ability of different constituents – under the rubrics of 'women', 'homosexuals', 'lesbians and gay men', 'bisexuals', 'transgenders', and so on – to work effectively together for common political ends, assuming that they have common political ends? How do those representations and related practices inform the subjectivities of women and minorities and constitute the array of viable political options such that those persons often find it difficult to avoid participating in, much less resist, patterns of domination? (Turner, 2000, pp. 107-108)

Queer thus became an inclusive term for both academia and the political/social rights surrounding the various gendered minorities mentioned in the above quote in opposition to white heteronormative masculinity. It draws on Butler's notions of gender as a performative construction, rejecting structuralist arguments about binaries between the genders in favour of a discourse of fluidity and fluctuation. Ultimately, it is a body of work that provides an equal platform for the multiplicity of minority groups in contemporary culture while

simultaneously celebrating the differences between them and undermining dominant (and often stereotypical) forms of representation.

The ‘blurring’ of supposedly stable identities has become one of the key focuses of queer academic writing. Berlant and Warner (1995) assert that the term queer must not depreciate into a mere ‘umbrella for gays, lesbians, bisexuals’ and transgenders (Berlant and Warner, 1995, p. 344). Instead, it must retain the very indefinability, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘unpredictability’ that initially inspired it (ibid). Queer ‘commentary’, as they re-dub it (Berlant and Warner, 1995, p. 343), is not ‘the theory *of* anything in particular’, but is instead empowered through its subversive ability to ‘take on varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences in various contexts’ (Berlant and Warner, 1995, p. 344). In order to truly exemplify the ever-shifting nature of gender, queer must itself be a flexible, malleable concept, removing the possibility of minority groups becoming constricted by traditional (male-generated) structuralist binaries of gender. The term ‘pansexual’²⁵³ can be employed to clarify this more explicitly, with its connotations of unspecified, all-inclusive and constantly changing genders and sexual orientations (Callis, 2014). Queer commentary, then, is ‘radically opposed to a fixed subject or practice, a political metaphor without a fixed referent’ (Enteen, 2010, p. 12). The body of work, reliant on performativity, indefinability and fluctuation, has informed writing about queering in relation to music and the Internet, notably in key texts by Enteen (2010) and Taylor (2012). Enteen employs the fluidity of queer commentary as a platform for examining the transnational nature of the web. She suggests that the Internet should allow for increased de-naturalisation of the boundaries between ‘normative gendered roles’ (Enteen, 2010, p. 14), particularly due to it providing ‘the means for individuals [to] appropriat[e], broaden and splinter the English language’ and thus move away from the restrictions language places on identity (Enteen, 2010, p. 15). This theme was

²⁵³ The fluid term ‘pansexual’ is not to be confused with more sexual orientation-specific labels such as ‘bisexual’ and ‘heteroflexible’.

confirmed to be of interest to Arca in his interview for this thesis, and is referred to in my analysis of his output later in this section (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). Enteen engages with queer commentary with the aim of revealing that the economical and political changes generated by globalised digital spaces ‘allow for [the] recasting’ of gendered and national identities (Enteen, 2010, p. 14). In doing so, she provides arguably the most comprehensive overview of queer theory’s relationship to the cultural changes generated by the Internet to date.²⁵⁴ Taylor applies queer theory to popular music studies, drawing extensively on Susan Sontag’s 1964 definition of ‘camp’. Taylor suggests that camp ‘offers a commentary on gender construction, performance and enactment, thus situating [it] within a [transgressive] queer [...] discourse’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 67). She argues that the proliferation of camp throughout popular music’s history²⁵⁵ renders it critical to queer analyses of music, due to its role ‘as a politicised form of queer parody, pastiche and performance’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 68). Many other historical non-heteronormative musical styles and movements such as drag (Taylor, 2012, p. 85), ‘genderfuck’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 99), queer punk/‘queercore’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 117) and ‘riot grrrl-style third-wave feminism’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 150) have transcended conservative gender definitions and promoted a queer mentality of fluctuation, inclusivity and celebration of difference. Several of the artists analysed below embrace these themes of camp, drag and ‘genderfuck’ in their digital queer identities.

Having emphasised the importance that malleability plays within queer theory, I now outline the concepts of posthumanism and cyborgism. Archey and Peckham’s Post-Internet manifesto emphasises the necessity of exploring ‘the physicality of the network [and] the posthuman body’ in contemporary art, indicating that these issues are critical to artists self-consciously exploring digital environments in their work (Archey and Peckham, October

²⁵⁴ Although its relevance to this thesis is somewhat limited (she does not, for instance, engage with the notion of the Post-Internet), it remains a critical text and one worthy of further reading.

²⁵⁵ This can be seen in the work of artists as diverse in context and style as Freddie Mercury, Justin Hawkins and Neil Tennant (Taylor, 2012, pp. 79-80).

2014, p. 9). The academic discourse surrounding posthumanism evolved from the cyberpunk movement of the 1970s-1980s, documented comprehensively in Cavallero's *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (2000). Cyberpunk was an aesthetic that drew on the increasing popularity of science fiction as a genre.²⁵⁶ It related to the accelerating presence of digital technology in the late-twentieth century (e.g. computers, robots and interactive interfaces) alongside fears about the forthcoming new millennium, and sought to aestheticise 'the conflict between the individual and a dehumanized environment' (Cavallero, 2000, p. 6). J.G. Ballard's cyberpunk novel *Crash* (1973), for example, was symptomatic of a wider cyber-dystopian sentiment that 'the loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured [has resulted in a general] psychotic fragmentation' (ibid). This identity-based anxiety is critical to cyberpunk. As Cavallero explains,

The virtual interchangeability of human bodies and machines is a recurring theme in cyberpunk and intrinsic to its representations of cyborgs. [...] 'What aspect of humanity makes us human?' [...] So-called real humans interact with Artificial Intelligences, androids, cyborgs, computer-simulated bodies, mutants and replicants and are required to establish what exactly distinguishes the natural from the artificial (Cavallero, 2000, p. 13)

Cyberpunk, then, was preoccupied with concerns surrounding the differences between biological humanity and the artificial intelligence of androids, as well as fears regarding the potential for these two apparently separate 'species' to be hybridised. The term that came to describe this possible hybridisation is 'cyborg', which provided the title of Donna Haraway's seminal 1990 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto'. Haraway agrees with the cyberpunk assertion that 'a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 1990). However, she moves away from the dystopian view of 1980s science fiction and instead argues that cyborgs are 'oppositional [and] utopian', offering the potential for a 'post-gender' identity that provides a 'different

²⁵⁶ This was particularly due to the rise of dystopian films such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982) and *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983); and novels such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984) and the works of J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs.

logic of repression' that must be absorbed by women for 'survival' (ibid). Her proposition is that women should exploit 'cyborg imagery [to find] a way out of the maze of dualisms' of patriarchal culture (ibid). Much like queer theory, Haraway's cyborg seeks to undermine the limitations of an unyielding structuralist discourse, instead promoting an indefinable cybernetic language and identity that is the equivalent of 'speaking in tongues' to destroy 'the circuits' of white male dominance (ibid).^{xxv}

Katherine Hayles popularised the term 'posthumanism' as an academic title for this body of discourse (1999). Her definition of the 'posthuman' is similar to that of cyborgism, but it streamlines many of the discourse's previous themes. Hayles is insistent about the importance of the 'human' part of the term, explaining that the 'human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines' (Hayles, 1999, pp. 283-284). In other words, posthumanism must not make the mistake of suggesting that any potential hybridisation would/does result in technology's dominance over humanity; rather, it is the other way round. Humans are self-aware, and therefore it is they who are in control in any cyborgian relationship. Posthumanism is, critically, not a full dissolution of the concept of what it means to human. Instead, it is a fusion of human and machine that *enhances* the humanity of the individual. The prefix 'post' is critical due to its allusion to a temporal context, highlighting the fact that hybridisation is a cybernetically adaptive and evolutionary method of preventing the species from going obsolete (ibid). The posthuman is in opposition to conservative notions of the self as 'grounded in presence, identified with originary guarantees and teleological trajectories, associated with solid foundations and logical coherence' (Hayles, 1999, p. 286). Instead, it

envision the conscious mind as a small subsystem running its program of self-construction and self-assurance while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamics of complex systems. [It signals] the end of a certain conception of the human, a

conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings (ibid)

This is evocative of the key themes of queer theory. Posthumanism is an attempt to generate a new method of self-identification that is driven by an individual's 'conscious mind' rather than the prescribed ideologies of society's 'complex systems'. By fusing with technology, the posthuman has the ability to think differently to, and escape the human autonomy of, those with patriarchal 'wealth, power, and leisure'. It is, as such, a concept that appeals strongly to marginalised and oppressed groups such as women, LGBTQ communities and ethnic minorities. The link to Post-Internet ideas is clear: as noted by Jurgenson, the Post-Internet generation has fused with the digital structures of cyberspace, rendering them 'posthuman' in comparison with, for instance, generations that do not have the same symbiotic relationship with these technologies (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). Post-Internet youths have an unprecedented opportunity to elude the restrictive representational boundaries of the pre-Internet era through their symbiotic hybridisation with digital formats, and that is the focus of this and the next section. Susana Loza combines many of these theories of posthumanism and cyborgian identity with discussions of popular music. Loza argues that electronic music, through its sampling and foregrounding of the 'diva', has generated a sexualised cyborgian creature she refers to as the 'fembot, [...] symbolised by [...] sensual sighs and simulated cries' (Loza, 2001, p. 351). She suggests that musical representation of women has failed to achieve the optimistic image of the posthuman outlined by Hayles, instead causing the 'posthuman diva [to be] afflicted with terminal sexuality. Her sexed-up samples lasciviously lampoon the hetero-natural but often remain defined by its dualistic deformations, [...] parodying the natural' (Loza, 2001, p. 352).²⁵⁷ Fembots may be a cyborgian hybrid of human and machine, but instead of escaping the limitations of structuralist discourses about gender, they merely become transplants of 'dualistic' normativity and continue to be dominated and sexualised by

²⁵⁷ This description is evocative of the analysis of SOPHIE's music in Section Five.

male producers and listeners alike.²⁵⁸ As such, it is clear that posthuman theory is not always as straightforwardly utopian as Hayles' and Haraway's manifestos indicate.²⁵⁹ However, this does not negate its importance to the development of the trend I have dubbed 'digital queer', which is the focus of the remainder of this section.^{xxvi}

DIS Magazine and its associates have drawn on queer commentary and posthumanism, updating these ideas in relation to their Post-Internet art. *DIS* aims to 'offer alternatives and open doors' (Haj-Najafi, August 2011), while its 'oppositional' and 'alternative' approach (ibid) evokes the refusal of heteronormativity that defines queer and posthuman theories. Themes of fluctuating identity from these two bodies of work are located throughout the e-zine's output. Much like the theorists highlighted above, the artwork that *DIS* hosts 'seeks to dissolve conventions, distort realities, disturb ideologies, [and] dismember the establishment' (*DIS*, March 2010). Many of those involved with *DIS* identify as queer, and searching for the term on the site provides multiple examples of the magazine's association with non-heteronormative artists such as Hood By Air, Total Freedom,²⁶⁰ Wu Tsang, Zanele Muholi, McKenzie Wark and boyChild.²⁶¹ ^{xxvii} Queering has thus become a key aspect of *DIS*' output. Additionally, however, the site's art is preoccupied with the web and its impact on identity.²⁶² A search for 'Internet' on *DIS* unearths many conceptual pieces, most of which are clearly tied into notions of identity and the self.²⁶³ This deliberate and on-

²⁵⁸ Loza's analysis is highlighted more extensively in the next section as she reflects at length about the digitised voice in music.

²⁵⁹ There are many contemporary popular examples of dystopian studies/hypotheses regarding the 'posthuman' nature of existence in the post-millennial world. See, for instance, the satirical television series *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-), horror feature films such as *Unfriended* (Gabriadze, 2015) and *Cyberbully* (Chanan, 2015), and books such as Carr's *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (2011) and Scott's *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of living in the digital world* (2015).

²⁶⁰ See Section Nine.

²⁶¹ See also the interview conducted for this thesis with ADR, who celebrated *DIS Magazine*'s 'support [for] a diverse community of multi-racial, young, queer artists whose voices could otherwise be subjugated by mainstream media institutions' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015).

²⁶² This was stressed in both Section Two and Section Five, when I explored the importance that concepts such as the virtual plaza and online commoditisation play in *DIS*' overall aesthetic.

²⁶³ See, for instance, interviews, articles and exhibitions entitled 'Internet Therapy' (Ripps, 2010), 'Contemporary Internet Lifestyles' (Ito, 2013), 'Hito Steyerl – Politics of Post-Representation' (Jordan, 2014),

going attempt to scrutinise Post-Internet experiences is an updated version of posthumanism's preoccupation with the relationship between humanity and technology. *DIS* is provocative in its exploration of gender and the Internet, refusing to adhere to normative trends and instead welcoming experimental artists with marginalised backgrounds and unconventional identities. Its editors note the similarities between posthumanism and queer theory, especially in relation to the fluctuation of identity and refusal of dualistic discourse, embracing the 'varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences' (Berlant and Warner, 1995, p. 344), 'different logic of repression' (Haraway, 1990) and 'radical oppos[ition] to a fixed subject or practice' (Enteen, 2010, p. 12) that delineate these concepts. Essentially, *DIS* and its followers fuse the themes of both bodies of work into a singular Post-Internet aesthetic style, encompassing the gendered subversions of queer art and a more contemporary, digi-focused take on posthumanism. This fusion is what I have labelled 'digital queer'.

It is therefore useful to briefly clarify the relationship between the Internet and gender to define this term more astutely. Anonymity on the web (due to the prevalence of pseudonyms and avatars) has enabled web users to 'perform' multiple identities other than their own.²⁶⁴ This has resulted in experimental gender performances online, and a large body of academic work is dedicated to the trend for web users to inhabit many mutable digital sexual personas.²⁶⁵ Both Clark (2009) and Elund (2012) consider the role of *Second Life*, a digital 'environment [...] where any individual (allowing for hardware access and capability) can create a representational embodiment of themselves to interact with others real-time' (Elund, 2012), in relation to gender performativity. As Elund further explains, the potential for anonymity afforded by this virtual world enables 'individuals to experiment with various

'Post-Recently' (Tan, 2013), and 'Club Kids: The Social Life of Artists on *Facebook*' (Troemel, Vierkant and Vickers, 2013).

²⁶⁴ See Section Six.

²⁶⁵ See Clark, 2009; Elund, 2012; Roberts and Parks, 1999; Turkle, 1994; Palomares and Lee, 2010; Herring and Martinson, 2004; Hills, 2000; Adam and Green, 2001; Rellstab, 2007; and Hofer, 2006.

guises of their identity such as bodily form and sexuality' (ibid). In other words, anyone utilising *Second Life* is capable of taking on the virtual form of any (and many) gendered identities that they desire.²⁶⁶ Palomares and Lee (2010) provide an interesting investigation into the ways in which men and women frequently take on oppositional roles online (exploring these self-representations in relation to communication and linguistic style), although their article lacks discussion of queer theory and is limited by emphasis on the conservative binary discourse of masculine and feminine behaviour. More useful are articles by Roberts and Parks (1999) and Turkle (1994). Both analyse the multiplicity of gendered identities that a single individual can inhabit through their interaction with digital spaces, stressing the queer nature of this approach as 'the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit' (Turtle, 1994). Interestingly, Justin of 18+²⁶⁷ has suggested that

There's a huge gap, or discrepancy, between the user and the platform, or the images on it. [...] A shitty avatar in *Second Life* [is] a very concrete example of a constructed but not totally convincing identity. [...] There's an element of a constructed self, but like a constructed second self. [...] There's always an element of extreme superficiality – vacuous superficiality [and] sexy cyborgs also have something to do with this I think. [...] I think we're becoming more symbiotic with computers (18+, thesis interview, 2014)

As such, this exploration of different visual identities online is not solid or inflexible, and can actually come across as 'unconvincing' due to its splintering and fluctuating nature. This 'unconvincing' aspect naturally provides a platform from which artistic playfulness and experimentation can develop. As outlined above, the most crucial theme of queer commentary is that of fluidity and mutability, and Post-Internet users engaging in web-based gender explorations evince this.²⁶⁸ Roberts and Parks argue that this 'experimental behaviour' is temporary, and is not necessarily 'an enduring expression' of a person's actual sexual or gendered orientation (Roberts and Parks, 1999). However, I would suggest that this not only

²⁶⁶ Although *Second Life* is the most visible example of this, it is worth noting that it is a widespread trend that can be located across the web, from the use of social media to interaction on various MMORPG games.

²⁶⁷ 18+'s work is discussed in relation to avatars and identity politics in the next section.

²⁶⁸ Although, it must be noted, they are undoubtedly not all exploring queer themes with the same self-consciousness that drives the ideologies of queer academics, or even the digital queer musicians analysed below.

ignores the fact that virtual gender play echoes wider acceptance of progressive identity politics due to both the web's potential for anonymity and the ease with which people online can locate and communicate with like-minded individuals, but it also fails to recognise the collapse between virtual and organic experiences that is part of Post-Internet experience. There is an inseparable relationship between the web and the performance of identity, and gender is a critical aspect of this. The Internet is the most interactive example of a cybernetic space through which posthuman identities can develop, and it is telling that this has occurred in conjunction with a wider interest in performative gender politics. The mutability and anonymity of the web has rendered it a space in which the practices and identity politics associated with these two bodies of representational theory have the potential to flourish in alignment with one another. Lucie Greene asserts that 'the whole perception of sexual orientation is being challenged by the millennials. [...] Among the cohort of 12 to 19 year olds defining Generation Z [the] lines between male and female have become increasingly blurred, and we're seeing that reflected' in contemporary art and fashion (Greene, quoted in *La Ferla*, February 2015). These issues are thus all critical to Post-Internet art's preoccupation with the relationship between digital culture and 'real world' identity. These explorations can be located in the work of the musicians addressed below, each of whom deconstructs traditional gender roles through the use of web-specific aesthetics and themes, and whose conceptual approach is frequently deeply personal. The Internet, in many of these cases, has provided an open forum in which queer identities can be explored safely and with less fear of consequence^{xxviii} due to its liberating promotion of anonymity and taking on multiple personas. This is digital queer: a fusion of the themes of both posthumanism and queer theory, replicating the potential for gender play enabled by the Post-Internet condition.

Digital queer is practiced most visibly in the Post-Internet video art of director (and frequent *DIS* collaborator) Ryan Trecartin. Trecartin's films are preoccupied with 'fractured

identity in the digital age' (Lafreniere, November 2010), evoking cyborgism and 'the queer voice' (Tomkins, March 2014). As such, representing digitalised sexuality is 'important in [his] work' (ibid). He combines his interest in queer commentary and Post-Internet identity into surreal films in which his characters have their faces painted 'in primary colours, and [perform] a lot of gender shifting, enhanced by wigs and exaggerated vamping' (ibid; see also Figures 50 and 51). He 'dresses his characters up in wigs that render them genderless, writes scripts for characters made up of cliché advertising jargon and text-message vernacular, and then strains the characters' voices through chipmunk filters' (Frank, 2014). Langley explains that

The manipulation of [his films] is so relentless that this fusion of physical digital selves is realised within the plane of the image. [...] Footage is sped up, slowed down and reversed; colours strobe and bleed; flesh is post-production plastic; bodies exist in several places at once – in Trecartin's intensely processed films, expression is altered by what it passes through. The medium might not be the message, but always inflects it. The titles of the films themselves – which read like corrupt data files, studded with punctuation errors and incomprehensible acronyms – are a neat symbol of the instability of Trecartin's vision of human identity (Langley, 2012)

Through the self-conscious inclusion of 'gender shifting' and the evocation of a 'fusion of physical digital selves' Trecartin is exploring the relationship between queering identity and the potential for cyborgian hybridisation online. It has been argued that his films highlight

how the Internet changes the way we relate to the world and to one another. [His] videos are rooted in the very world these changes have brought about. It is a place of multiple individual narratives unfolding simultaneously, of shifting identities and genders, of triumphant consumerism, and of young people yakking maniacally into cell phones. [...] Everybody in Trecartin's work overcommunicates, [...] and the message is almost always about the self – a melodrama of solipsism (Tomkins, March 2014)

A queering of gender and an interest in the effects of contemporary technology on 'young people' in particular are central to Trecartin's vision. He acknowledges that these 'young people live on the Internet and are free to assume various personalities at will', and his work explores the potential that the web therefore holds as a space for encouraging non-heteronormative discourse (ibid). He even suggests that gender itself is an increasingly

obsolete concept in Post-Internet culture, arguing that ‘personality is replacing gender and how people are defined’ in a posthuman era in which identities are increasingly forged and multiplied through social networks (Holsten and Trecartin, 2009). Although on the surface his rapid editing style appears unsettling and discordant, it actually ‘present[s] the process [of Post-Internet cyborgism] as thrilling, impulsive, and fun’ (Langley, 2012) by retaining the utopian visions of posthumanism and cyborgism outlined by Haraway and Hayles and celebrating the fact that ‘new technologies create different qualities in understanding and presenting ourselves performatively’ (Lange, 2008). Trecartin appreciates the similarities between the two separate conceptual fields of queer commentary and posthuman theory, and his work fuses the two into a consideration of the potential to escape heteronormative gender binaries through interaction with contemporary technology.

Throughout the course of his interview for this thesis, Trecartin pointed to the important role that Post-Internet identity has played in his work. He explained that his videos investigate ‘how the Internet is being used, and the way it’s transforming the way we communicate and share ideas and the way we think of ourselves, and the potential for how we choose to exist’ (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015). He expressionistically emphasises this in his videos through the use of the digital medium itself, with his pangendered characters’ personalities symbolically hybridising with the technology through an extremely confrontational use of jump-cuts, garish colours and digital animation. It is not the characters’ words that define them for the audience, but their digital presentation. Evoking comparable issues of narcissism and social media to those of the previous section, Trecartin is suggesting that the communicative networks and systems online have had the effect of reconfiguring the identities of web users. In asserting that these mediums change ‘the way we think of ourselves [and] choose to exist’, he begins to clarify some of the themes that I have addressed here under the term ‘digital queer’. The Internet and social networks are platforms for

performing various different identities, genders and selves simultaneously. Trecartin stresses that:

I'm trying to focus on the potential for the self to be a place of invention and being a little speculative on the possibility of one's consciousness being spread across and shared across multiple forms of existence and different reality sets to deal with. [...] Like a diversification of the self, and that self sprawls across many different ways of being. [...] The ability to access things that were once locked to geography, or cultural, or ethnic, or gender [becomes] more malleable (ibid)

It is clear from his assessment of his work that Trecartin is attracted to the potential 'diversification of the self' that is a critical aspect of Post-Internet identity politics. As I argued throughout the previous section, it is almost a necessity for the Post-Internet generation to act out a multitude of roles online. Trecartin sees this as intrinsically positive, suggesting that the online self becomes a canvas for 'inventiveness and innovation' that enables web users to escape the limitations that language and binary thinking place on identity and self-representation due to the potential to be 'someone else' in the pseudo-anonymous online world (ibid). This dissolves previous prescriptive notions of gender, and instead allows the aforesaid social networking 'personality' (or even personalities) to be the defining factor in a person's performed identity (or identities). Trecartin is queering the notion of gender boundaries entirely through a celebration of absolute multiplicity and pseudonymity. The most effective escape, proposes Trecartin, from the limiting nature of gendered representation is to simultaneously avoid and/or diversify representations of one's self through the use of anonymising and personality-driven virtual networks. This is digital queering in practice.

I now take the notion of digital queer into an exploration of Post-Internet musicians that have embodied the concept in their public personas. These artists live out the Post-Internet condition in both a personal and artistic way, and a clear investment in authenticity and contemporary queer identity motivates their work. Arguably the most visible example of this has been Michael Quattlebaum Jr. and his other self 'Teen Raptress Mykki Nicole

Blanco' (Kretowicz, March 2013). Quattlebaum started as a performance poet, with his transgressive lyrics provocatively and aggressively standing up for LGBTQ rights.²⁶⁹ It was not until he publicly presented his Mykki Blanco persona, however, that a self-conscious fusion of queer theory and posthumanism really began to dominate his work. While on the surface Blanco could be regarded as operating in the 'drag' tradition underlined by Taylor (2012, p. 85),²⁷⁰ he²⁷¹ is informed by a far more complex understanding of transgender identity and gender politics. Blanco is defined by his 'multiplicity', with Kretowicz explaining that he can, at different times, be seen dressed as a glamorous diva, 'shirtless Michael, with the head shaved', a 'Madame Libertine' figure, and 'a blue-eyed "genderless"' being, all of whom frequently employ 'consciously macho' lyrics (Kretowicz, March 2013) (see Figure 52). Blanco is playing with the concept of gender and illuminating the potential for fluidity that queer theory promotes. Quattlebaum describes Blanco as being androgynous and ambiguous, insisting that

Mykki Blanco isn't just female Mykki. Mykki Blanco is Mykki Blanco 'female', Mykki Blanco 'male', Mykki Blanco with blue eyes, Mykki Blanco with three eyes. I'm probably eventually going to do a video where it's not Mykki, where it's completely genderless, where it won't be Mykki 'boy' or 'girl' (ibid)

It is clear, then, that queer theory is a crucial component of the gender experiments of Blanco's public persona. Blanco is, essentially, gender fluidity in action. He can appear in any costume, representing any gender, and still be Mykki Blanco. This amplifies the fact that Post-Internet identity is constantly in-flux, suggesting that individuals cannot be defined by their relationship to any singular gender, while also drawing on the culture of gender play generated by the web and avatars. Yet Quattlebaum's contemplation of identity also fuses

²⁶⁹ See his 2011 published collection *From the Silence of Duchamp to the Noise of Boys*.

²⁷⁰ It must be stated that the fact that he is introducing drag and queer themes into a traditionally homophobic and misogynistic genre in hip-hop is undoubtedly highly subversive.

²⁷¹ Quattlebaum had previously utilised female pronouns to describe Blanco, emphasising 'her' femininity. However, more recently he has employed male pronouns. Although the reason behind this change has not been publicly revealed, it seems to be related to both the fluid nature of Blanco/Quattlebaum's gender identity, as well as Quattlebaum's interest in amplifying the inseparable nature of both of his personas. I also use male pronouns here in respect of Quattlebaum's choice.

queer theory with elements of posthumanism. Quattlebaum is ‘fascinated by [the] immediacy in which [individuals are] able to expose themselves’ on the Internet, and he developed Blanco to mirror the ‘slightly narcissistic selfie culture’ that is so strongly depicted in the videos of Ryan Trecartin (Brydon, January 2013). Blanco’s representation evokes posthuman ideas, and he has frequently stressed the potential for the web to develop identities that are of a different ‘species’ (Dowling, December 2013). This is reminiscent of cyborgism, and indicates that Blanco represents the notion that the queering of identity can be explored in more depth in an era of multiple online pseudonyms and technological prevalence. As Harper has suggested,

Blanco sometimes uses the term ‘mutant’, recalling the people born with extraordinary powers and consequently oppressed by society in *Marvel’s X-Men* comics and films, who have long been regarded as a metaphor for minority groups. ‘Mutant’ and ‘alien’ are great words for describing weird, futuristic, and avant-garde music, and [...] in Blanco’s case they serve as a positive identification, introduction, and celebration of difference (Harper, 9 January 2014)

Terms such as ‘mutant’, ‘alien’ and ‘species’ are associated with posthumanism’s science fiction narratives and the idea of moving beyond the restrictions placed on gender and identity by normative ‘human’ classification/language. By embracing this form of identification, while continuing to promote fluid and malleable gender politics, Blanco renders himself truly androgynous (see Figure 53). His use of comparable digital techniques to those found in Trecartin’s films, including ‘reappropriated autotune [that] creates a [...] wonky and weird’ inhuman vocal effect (Kretowicz, March 2013); production from ‘Internet-savvy creatives’ such as surreal trash artist Gobby and genre-fusionists Nguzunguzu (Brydon, January 2013); and music videos that deploy similar techniques of digital disintegration to those employed by James Ferraro,²⁷² emphasises his connections to the virtual realm. Blanco has fused queer theory and posthumanism, and has ensured that he has become a focal point for the themes of digital queering through collaborations with *DIS* and performances at

²⁷² See the previous section and the appendix.

GHE20G0TH1K.²⁷³ He is a figure in whom the Post-Internet generation can locate an authentic image of contemporary cultural experience and identity, as he offers a physical and virtual representation of the possibilities for a fluctuating self in digital environments and beyond.^{xxix}

Crucially, it is not just male or transgender musicians whose work has expressed the notion of digital queering.^{xxx} Kelela, an R&B singer associated with the Post-Internet club label Fade To Mind,²⁷⁴ is androgynous and fluid in her self-representation, and she uses her lyrics to promote queer and fluctuating gender politics. As an actress in many of transgender artist and *DIS* contributor Wu Tsang's films about queer identity, it is understandable that she should share similar concerns. The sensual lyrics on her mixtape *CUT 4 ME* (2013) are highly ambiguous in their sexual orientation. She has stated that most of the songs were written about breaking up with her boyfriend (Saxelby, October 2013), but there are tracks such as 'Cut 4 Me' that include the apparently contradictory lyrics 'So many nights/*She's* got me high/Someone who won't bite/Don't wanna stop *her*' (emphasis added). Listeners are refused the solidity and security of a traditional relationship between two people as Kelela is clearly addressing multiple unnamed lovers of various different genders across the album. She is effectively personifying the malleability of pansexuality in her lyrics. The structure of the mixtape itself brings this concern with queer politics into a more specific address to the Post-Internet. Kelela performs over productions by artists from Fade To Mind and its sister-label Night Slugs.²⁷⁵ *C4M* stylistically '[sits] on a knife-edge between the experimental dance underground and radio-ripe R&B melodies' (Cliff, October 2013). The musical backing ranges from angular grime (Nguzunguzu's 'Enemy'), to abstract and foreboding soundscapes (Bok Bok's 'A Lie'). These unorthodox and unmelodic styles here provide a platform for

²⁷³ See Section Nine.

²⁷⁴ See Section Nine.

²⁷⁵ Jam City, Kingdom, Nguzunguzu, Bok Bok, P. Morris, NA and Girl Unit all contribute to the release. Many of these producers have connections to Mykki Blanco and are considered in Section Nine.

emotive harmonies describing love and loss. Notably, the components are not seamlessly fused together to form conventional pop melodies. Rather, Kelela seems to be fighting constantly with the discomfiting sounds beneath her on every track, rendering the collaborations jarring and unsettling. This transforms her into a cybernetic figure, trapped in the digital sounds surrounding her. The positioning of 'Go All Night' on the mixtape symbolises these structural juxtapositions. The track is literally ripped into two pieces: its first section fades out unexpectedly, with its latter half appearing unannounced several tracks later. Kelela is deliberately contrasting sounds and styles violently, denoting the impact of hyper-saturation that has been brought about by information noise. Her digital soundscapes and pristine vocals are almost erotic in their glossiness, but the discomfiting nature of the songs' generic and textural disparities renders this eroticism alarming.²⁷⁶ Her live shows feature her operating alongside a DJ²⁷⁷ who, as she sings, disrupts and remixes her tracks around her, morphing them and refusing to allow them the solidity of a singular identity. Kelela is a pansexual muse for the digital queer style, fusing an interest in blurring gendered boundaries with a cyborgian exploration of the potential for fluctuating identities in digital environments. As with so many artists addressed throughout this thesis, this fluidity is recognisable and authentic to the cultural experience of Post-Internet existence in spite of its somewhat premeditated and self-conscious nature. This is music that represents a milieu of splintering identities and an ever-increasing inability to separate the real from the digital.^{xxxi}

The final example I present here offers what is perhaps the most experimental but simultaneously personal and intimate consideration of these themes. Arca and Jesse Kanda collaborate on musical and visual artworks that explore the fluctuations of identity and gender in digital spaces. The visuals and sounds employed by these two artists are highly

²⁷⁶ For a visual manifestation of this, see the 2014 video for her collaboration with Night Slugs' Bok Bok, 'Melba's Call', in which Kelela writhes sensually while appearing on a video call to a hyper-digital studio setting (Figure 54).

²⁷⁷ She most commonly performs alongside Total Freedom, a key Post-Internet producer/DJ analysed in Section Nine.

abstract and complex, but their emotive and personal power renders them evocative examples of Post-Internet and digital queer ideas. While they both indicated in interviews that they do not regard their work as ‘about the Internet or about how we absorb and process things’ in a ‘conscious [or] reactionary’ way that might ‘define’ them as ‘self-aware or ironic’ like *DIS Magazine*, they acknowledge that the web has ‘played a key role in’ their lives and ‘defined [them] as’ people, suggesting that they ‘have a very loving view’ of it (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). Identity politics and queer theory are definitive themes for Arca specifically, and he acknowledged the impact that Judith Butler’s writing has on his music and live performances (ibid). I analyse their work in three segments, first by examining the surreal and hyper-digital textures of Arca’s 2014 album *Xen* (Mute, 2014), second with a brief overview of several of the videos that Kanda has constructed to amplify the themes and sounds of Arca’s music, and finally by analysing the culmination of this collaboration in their 2014 live shows, which featured sonic, vocal, visual and performative aspects of digital queering in practice. *Xen* is a highly abstract project with structures and textures that, at face value, seem wilfully non-representational. Indeed, this aspect of the release appeared to provoke confused and even patronising reviews in major publications such as *Fact* and *The Wire*, whose writers seemed uncertain about what to make of the record despite these magazines’ interest in electronic music more generally. By addressing the simplistic language of these reviews, I develop an account of the juxtapositions and contrasting sensations of this record. Brown’s review for *The Wire* remains tied to the notion that electronic instrumentation is inauthentic, ‘cold’ and marked by an absence of emotion.²⁷⁸ He asserts that *Xen* is ‘indistinguishable from a high tech software demonstration’, with ‘every texture a laboured mirage of plug-ins and processing’ (Brown, November 2014, p. 63). He declares that Arca’s intention is not ‘to invoke some sort of human response’, but is instead to create ‘a variety pack of sonic memes,

²⁷⁸ This was highlighted in Section Three in relation to rock music’s mistrust of electronic music’s ‘visible’ instrumentation.

concise enough for viral dispersion yet dense with the technical wizardry so in demand by deep pocketed, chameleonic pop and hip-hop figures' (ibid). This view of electronic music in general, and Arca's work specifically, suggests that music that is not driven by acoustic instrumentation or conventional song structures can only ever be successful when utilised as instrumental backing for more 'traditional' elements (such as vocals). Brown does not recognise the potential for personality or self-representation in textures that are not acoustic or do not have the 'benefit [of] a rapper with [Arca collaborator Kanye] West's magnetism, or the alien sexuality of FKA twigs, another of [his] employers' (ibid). It is surprising that *The Wire*, a publication with significant investment in electronic music, would present such a 'romantic authenticity'-informed review of a work that, I argue, is intrinsically ambiguous, personal and, as Arca asserted throughout his interview for this thesis, self-representational in style (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). Arca did not simply construct these tracks with a view to collaborations with vocalists. In *Fact*, which had previously celebrated Arca's more linear beats-laden earlier releases, critic Maya Kalev claims to acknowledge the personal aspects and 'ambiguity' that drove Arca's construction of the record, yet continues to describe it in terms that uphold binary definitions of physical/virtual, organic/digital, human/robot, man/woman, etc. The review is comprised of statements that mirror those of Brown, such as 'every surface gleams with an unsettling digital shine, but [...] that sense of hyper-modernity can fall a little flat'; 'glittering surfaces of individual tracks [are] exotic and intricate, but fundamentally insubstantial'; 'the sequencing is haphazard at best, with tracks seemingly glued to one another arbitrarily rather than describing any narrative order'; and 'rather than providing a rhythmic framework, beats are by and large incidental to Arca's experiments with texture and timbre. [...] There's very little about them that's emotionally affecting' (Kalev, November 2014). While musical taste is, of course, subjective, and negative reviews are an inevitable part of any album release, it is problematic that these reviewers seem to have

located no examples of personality in this record. It is particularly concerning given that their commentaries do not even necessarily seem to have been made as criticisms, considering the relatively high scores that the album received from both writers.

Xen, according to Arca, is named after a side of his personality that he refers to ‘as “her”, but says [is] neither male nor female’ (Friedlander, 30 September 2014). She is a part of his ‘fragmented’, multi-faceted identity that comes out in much of his work (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). It is significant that he admires the writing of Judith Butler, believing that gender is a performance and that queer artists must break down the notion that sexuality is ‘black and white’ (ibid). He rejects the term ‘alter-ego’ to describe *Xen*, as she is actually a ‘part of me’ that is not restricted by the limitations that ‘clumsy’ language place on defining such an ethereal and abstract entity²⁷⁹ (ibid). She is ‘more joyous and messy’ than a mere ‘other me that I’m performing’ (ibid). *Xen* is a source of inspiration for Arca’s sonic approach, and his sound encompasses the complex emotions and ambiguities that comprise his relationship to her. His work draws on the blurry love-hate relationship that comes from the fact that ‘her mere existence is kind of repulsive and attractive at once’ (Arca, quoted in Friedlander, 30 September 2014). This begins to reveal why the reviews mentioned above have seemingly failed to locate personality in Arca’s music. The very issues that they criticise in the work – hyper-modern sheen, overly digital textures, ‘haphazard’ track sequencing – are in actuality critical aspects of the ambiguous personal exploration of self-identity that is exhibited on *Xen*. Arca has emerged in a Post-Internet context, and has a symbiotic relationship with the virtual spaces that he inhabits (as emphasised in the work of Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). As such, the most natural format for him to express the nuances of his inner self is through the highly digital textures of his music. Effectively, *Xen* is a sonic conceptual painting. It is ‘non-representational’ in a traditional sense, but instead offers abstract images

²⁷⁹ This outlook is reminiscent of the linguistic deconstructions of William S. Burroughs, Kodwo Eshun and the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit discussed in the appendix.

of the conflicting emotions that Arca experiences while simultaneously admiring, rejecting and ultimately embodying his ungendered ‘other’ self. The tracks evoke malleable and changeable splashes of contrasting colours instead of providing the conventional escapism of more expansive and consistent sonic environments. The ‘haphazard’ nature of the album’s structure is absolutely intentional. The delicate synthesized keyboards of ‘Failed’ clash with the aggressive Penderecki-esque strings of ‘Family Violence’ before moving into the club-oriented beats of lead single ‘Thievery’. Arca then brings in the intricate clockwork contraptions of ‘Lonely Thugg’ followed by the ethereal vocals and static-laden bass of ‘Fish’. These confrontational mood-swings and juxtapositions are deliberate animations of the fluctuations of queer identity, and their digital textures evoke the cyborgian symbioses of Post-Internet identity. As Arca has indicated in his interviews, the multiplicity of his ‘self’ is not straightforward or constantly enjoyable. It can be painful, it can cause self-doubt, and it can generate many concurrent divergent emotions. The instability of *Xen* – which shifts rapidly from ethereal beauty, to devastating sorrow, to dark sexual aggression, to upbeat joviality – symbolises the ungraspable nature of identity and gender in a Post-Internet world where people inhabit multiple identities simultaneously. As Arca asserted in his interview for this thesis,

I think about how binary works, from the 0s to the 1s, and my favourite moment is none of those resting spaces. It’s the millisecond that it takes to jump from one to the next. It’s the most fleeting ephemeral moment, but the moment of the most fertility. [The sudden shift from one sound to another is designed to evoke that] split second when you’re readjusting, gathering your bearings, trying to figure out where you are. [...] You’re listening to something really quiet and something really loud and jarring comes in. There’s like a millisecond where you’re not yourself. You’re just like an animal or something (Arca, thesis interview, 2015)

This calls to mind both Mykki Blanco’s attempts to shed the representational skin of ‘human’ identity to subvert gender classification, and Ryan Trecartin’s belief in the potential to take on ‘fleeting ephemeral’ personalities that shift constantly and thus elude simplistic categorisation. If Blanco utilises the medium of representation to highlight digital queer

aesthetics and Trecartin employs the visual/technological, *Xen* is the sonic document that most vividly expresses the feelings of people going through similar experiences. It is authentic in its abstract representation of the uncertainties and fluidity of digital queer identity that are a part of the Post-Internet experiences of his fans.²⁸⁰

The images and music videos that Jesse Kanda has produced for Arca explore similar fluctuations and shifting selves in virtual environments. As well as being collaborators, Arca and Kanda are close friends and share an ‘intertwined’ relationship (Kanda, thesis interview, 2014). As Kanda describes it, it is ‘like we’re a part of each other’s DNA’ (ibid). This intimate bond sees them working organically in tandem and producing art that, intentionally or not, ultimately generates similar themes and ideas.²⁸¹ Kanda has stated that ‘the Internet and the computer are my school, my paints, and my gallery. What I make today is a direct result of sitting in front of a computer ever since I was allowed to’ (ibid), which signals the importance that digital culture plays within his art. He formulates visual textures that share in the abstract ambiguities of his friend, as in the various images that decorate the artwork for *Xen* (see Figure 55), and is comparably intrigued by the potential for his videos to exhibit extreme sensualities and emotions. Videos include themes such as ‘falling in love and the desire to melt into that person, [...] violent self-expression and exposure, [and] reminder[s] to not let yourself be bummed out for too long’ (ibid). The expressive resonances of these motifs are clear in his videos, despite the fact that they predominantly forgo any attempt at narrative storytelling or ‘storied’ emotion.²⁸² His videos are primarily ‘minimal’ in terms of content, amplifying the sensations found in colour, texture and motion through digital animation/enhancement techniques. The clips for ‘Thievery’ (Figure 56) and ‘Xen’ (Figure 57), for instance, feature nothing but Arca’s ‘other’ dancing provocatively, but a variety of

²⁸⁰ These themes have latterly been explored further in Arca’s co-production on Björk’s *Vulnicura* (One Little Indian, 2015), which is referred to in the conclusion of this thesis.

²⁸¹ Indeed, their live performances have frequently seen Kanda’s visuals and Arca’s performative movements operating in almost perfect tandem, despite their apparently spontaneous nature.

²⁸² For more on the traditional narrative style of music videos, see Goodwin, 1992.

clashing emotions generated by the textures, distortions and coloration of the images themselves (evocative of the album's sonics) turn each film into a journey of sensations and sentiments. In the video named for her, Xen disintegrates and is pulled in multiple directions over and over again, her image splintering, morphing and attempting to escape the physical form that constrains the many facets of her identity. Whether or not this is the authorial intention of Kanda's image,²⁸³ the immediate reaction that it provokes is one that equates these visuals with the digital queering of Arca's release. Kanda uses primarily digital animation techniques to invoke these fluid and shape-shifting images, exploiting similar methods to those of Ryan Trecartin. As such, it is not just the complexity of queer gender that disrupts the actions and emotions of Xen (and, by extension, Arca). It is also the physical effect of digital technology on her body and, by extension, her identity.²⁸⁴

These themes reached a climax in the artists' collaborative live shows in 2014. Arca and Kanda took the opportunity to produce a multi-layered performance that amplified these motifs and rendered them even more abstract and subversive. The initial sign of these processes in action was located in Arca's selection of dress. He emerged onstage in a truly pansexual costume. His short, boyish haircut clashed with a pencil skirt, knee-length leather platform boots and, at varying shows, leather crop-tops or Hood By Air-designed 'straightjacket'-like shirts (see Figure 58). Shayne Oliver's Hood By Air is a fashion label that is preoccupied with the notion of identity in the digital age, with its clothes featuring self-customisable traits such as removable parts and excessive employment of zippers.²⁸⁵ They are everyday costumes for an age of identity shape-shifting, built on themes of 'concealing identity' and 'transcending the physical aspects of ourselves that unfortunately

²⁸³ He stated clearly in his interview for this thesis that his work is not necessarily focused on the concept of 'identity-in-flux'.

²⁸⁴ Holly Herndon, Death Grips and FKA twigs (who has collaborated with Arca and Jesse Kanda) employ a comparable self-conscious use of digital animation techniques to explore Post-Internet identity, and these themes are analysed in Section Eight.

²⁸⁵ See Section Two.

divide us’ while exploring the uncanny posthuman imagery associated with twenty-first century ‘surgical beauty’ and ‘faces [that look] sort of altered’ (Singer, February 2015). The label thus has much in common with the mutable nature of *Xen*. In this visual self-stylisation Arca aligned himself with the Post-Internet work of other digital queer artists listed above, while simultaneously underscoring the ambiguities and contradictions of his own musical approach. When asked about his selection of dress in his interview for this thesis, he explained that

A transgender person is physically embodying and illustrating the shit we’re talking about. They live it, and they have no choice but to live it, [which was something] I was thinking about a lot [when] I was deciding how to present the record. [...] I didn’t just wanna be in drag either. I wanted to complicate that. [...] I grew up around people like Mykki, Le1f, Shayne. And everyone has like different approaches to how to solve this problem. How do you solve the problem to communicate queering yourself? And also to do that without becoming a caricature. And so I’ve thought a lot about how to do it for myself, and for me it was important not to wear a wig. It was something that I didn’t wanna do. Maybe you have to zoom in a little bit more to see it or whatever (Arca, thesis interview, 2015)

These quotes, plus his admiration for Judith Butler’s theories about fluid identity and his declaration that her writing has inspired much of his work (ibid), suggest that Arca’s live costuming is an attempt to physically embody queer ideas. It incorporates both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ elements alongside recognisably LGBTQ fashion styles into a fluid and ungraspable queer identity. Arca’s musical set-up featured the same digital instrumentation as his record, and initially he took up the traditional position (behind his kit) that typically characterises live presentations of electronic music, straightforwardly and understatedly performing the music in tandem with Kanda’s visual imagery. However, within the next few tracks the two artists cycled through a number of contrasting and extreme sensations. Kanda’s visuals pulled apart the notion of a solid ‘human’ identity in increasingly complex ways, foregrounding images of *Xen* in various emotional and disintegrative states, while Arca distorted sentimentality by shifting rapidly between gentle piano pieces, club tracks, surreal

collages,²⁸⁶ and noisy, aggressive bursts of static (Figure 59).²⁸⁷ Finally, Arca climbed in front of the screen onto which Kanda's images were projected and began to perform like the diva that he has proclaimed *Xen* to be (Friedlander, 30 September 2014), voguing like a ballroom dancer.²⁸⁸ The entire performance was multi-faceted and provocatively contrary in its execution, and it ultimately epitomised not only the themes of Arca and Kanda's work, but also the Post-Internet style of digital queer more widely. ^{xxxii}

In conclusion, this section has explored the concept of digital queering, revealing the importance that both queer and posthuman discourses hold within the work of Post-Internet musicians. The public personas and output of Mykki Blanco, Ryan Trecartin, Kelela and Arca are informed by the notions of both digital identity and pansexuality, with each of these artists performing as queer cyborgs. These are performances that mirror their personal lives, granting them a reputation for authenticity with audiences undergoing comparable experiences with Post-Internet identity politics. These musicians exhibit an acknowledgement of the constructedness and performativity of identity, as well as a deliberate avoidance of heteronormative binary oppositions. In many ways, these artists provide the ultimate representation of malleable Post-Internet identity. The multiplicity of influences and hyper-saturation of cultural material brought about by information noise disintegrates the notion of a 'stable' identity online, and the queering of the musicians analysed here mirrors this dissolution of the self. In taking on these public personas and exploring them so personally and viscerally, each of these musicians invokes the Post-Internet milieu and, indeed, queer cultures more widely. This renders their public images and music authentic (in the sense of being true to one's cultural experiences) to the increasingly cyborgian lives of many of their

²⁸⁶ This is a technique outlined in Section Nine.

²⁸⁷ A surprising aspect of the tour, and one that further blurred lines of identity, was Arca's introduction of vocals to his sound (an element that was largely absent from *Xen*). He moved rapidly from hyper-aggressive 'masculine' raps in English, to delicate wordless falsetto crooning, to multi-lingual (Spanish, most prominently) rhymes, exploring every aspect of his identity (including, in his inclusion of Spanish references, his Venezuelan upbringing).

²⁸⁸ See Section Nine.

fans. The next section of this thesis draws on these themes to analyse the ways in which several musicians' sonic and vocal experiments authentically invoke the concepts of Post-Internet identity in increasingly complex and multi-layered ways.

Chapter 4 – Section 8: Vocal science, digital intimacy and embodying the virtual

My laptop is an extension of my memory and self, it is a conduit to the people I care about and [...] retains more knowledge about me in one moment than I can muster (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014)

The void that's created and the gap between the user and their online identity is really pregnant [...] with potential for interpretation. [It] becomes almost a participatory event for the audience member as they get to have these wild fantasies of who these people are (18+, thesis interview, 2014)

Autotune [is] the sonic equivalent of digital airbrushing, and the (over) use of the two technologies result in a look and feel that is hyperbolically enhanced rather than conspicuously artificial. [It creates the] feeling of a digitally upgraded normality – a perverse yet ultra-banal normality, from which all flaws have been erased (Fisher, 2014, loc. 2584)

This section analyses musicians whose oeuvres are focused on engaging with (or embodying) Post-Internet identity while stressing the intimate relationship that web users have with their technological devices. Many of these musicians are preoccupied with the voice, the most 'human' and 'authentic' instrument in popular music (Dickinson, 2001, p. 335), and attempt to connect that humanity to digital environments in their sonic productions. These artists, including Visionist, Holly Herndon and Laurel Halo, utilise both 'masculine' and 'feminine' vocals, rendering them aesthetically robotic and ungendered in their investigation of the increasingly common use of synthesized voices, autotune and other 'inhuman' vocals in popular culture. Their techniques and themes are inspired by the Post-Internet condition more widely, drawing further focus on a cyborgian dissolution of the self in online spaces while continuing debates surrounding gender and queering. Furthermore, several musicians demonstrate these themes in practically every aspect of their output – sonic, visual and representational – suggesting that they consider their public identities to be intrinsically connected to the web in a far more complex and inseparable way to the critiques of the musicians in Sections Five and Six. As Friedlander puts it, these musicians 'dive headfirst into' the Post-Internet world, 'wrestle with it [and] make art about it' (Friedlander, 17 April 2015). These artistic experiments with vocals and identity provide truly

androgynous and fluid posthuman representations in contemporary music, while also evoking and critiquing the dystopian feelings of entrapment, loneliness and disorientation generated by over-exposure to information noise. There are three parts here. The first of these highlights Dickinson (2001), Auner (2003) and Loza's (2001) analyses of vocal science (in relation to posthumanism specifically) in popular music. The second part explores Post-Internet musicians drawing on vocal science in their work in order to illuminate the relationship between the self and digital spaces. This section concludes by examining artists whose oeuvres are coloured by their preoccupation with, and intimate connection to, the online world, with specific reference to Death Grips, 18+ and FKA twigs.

As outlined in the third section of this thesis, debates regarding the (in)authenticity of electronic music have dominated an academic and journalistic culture preoccupied with the 'traditional' instrumentation of rock, jazz and folk music. However, there has been little critique as deeply imbedded in discourses of musical authenticity as that of vocal manipulation, particularly in relation to the effects of the voice enhancement technology autotune.²⁸⁹ This is due to the important role that vocals establish in terms of an individual's identity, gender and 'talent'. If, as Gilbert and Pearson suggest, a guitar may be regarded as an ideologically 'authentic' (almost prosthetic) extension of a musician's body, defined by its invisibility and represented as a muse through which the artist's internal abilities can be expressed (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, p. 112), the voice is reputed to be the artist's identity incarnate: it allows 'you to be the music (and for the music to be you)' (Dickinson, 2001, p. 335). Controversy has thus often surrounded attempts to manipulate the voice, as it is the most crucial signifier of identity and sincerity. This issue has resulted in a significant amount of academic discourse about the voice in popular music, but my focus is on those texts that analyse the ways in which digitisation has affected the treatment of vocals in relation to

²⁸⁹ See, for instance, Scherman's tirade against the fact that 'computer music makes [musicians and vocalists] lazy' in *The New York Times* (2001).

gender and identity.^{xxxiii} This emphasises the relationship of autotune, sampling and vocoders to debates about posthumanism, digital queer and the Post-Internet condition. Dickinson (2001) focuses primarily on the role that vocoders have played in the construction, and subsequent representation, of female pop vocalists. She analyses the bearing that these devices have had on ‘the representational practices of the voice, of computer-made music, of femininity and of homosexuality’ (Dickinson, 2001, p. 333). Dickinson suggests that a vocoder, as opposed to other forms of vocal manipulation equipment,

will divide the vocal source signal (which gets called the ‘modulator’) into various frequency bands which can then be used to process a ‘carrier’ signal [...] and render it more sonically complex. The result is an overlap where the instrument takes on the timbre and articulation of the vocals [...] whilst superimposing some of its own texture and a more emphatic sense of its tempered pitch. [...] As *glissandi* and more ‘human’, momentarily out-of-tune ‘misses’ are obscured, pitch changes become decidedly jolty and ‘robotic’ – perhaps the vocoder’s most recognisable signature (Dickinson, 2001, p. 334)

In other words, the sound of the voice is distorted and rendered ‘jolty and “robotic”’ through fusion with digital instrumentation. Dickinson’s article outlines the consequences of these devices in relation to gender. She argues that ‘the vocoder is now much more readily conjoined with if not the female voice, then at least the “feminised” one’ (Dickinson, 2001, p. 337) due to its prevalence in the pop songs of many female R&B artists including Britney Spears and Cher. She suggests that this is indicative of wider assumptions surrounding the gendering of technology, with a man ‘knowing [his] way around [digital instruments] ranking significantly higher than [a woman] being able to work a “domestic” or sweat shop tool like a sewing machine’ (ibid). Essentially, mastering music technology is considered authentic, empowering and ‘masculine’. By extension, the ability to ‘master’ someone’s voice through digital manipulation places the (predominantly male) producer in a more dominant position than the (female) singer. The image Dickinson uses is of a male musician (and, ultimately, audience) ‘rummaging around inside [the female voice] with an inorganic probe’ in an attempt to demystify, understand and control it (ibid). The voice is, as stated,

representationally connected to the identity of its owner, and a male producer is possessing and controlling a woman's identity by manipulating her voice. Dickinson is not entirely pessimistic about the implications of this technology for female singers, however. She suggests that 'the vocoder intervenes at an unavoidable level of musical expression – it uses the medium as the message – encouraging the listener to think of these women as professionals within music practice' (Dickinson, 2001, p. 341). Therefore when a singer such as Cher foregrounds the use of technology on her voice, she is experimenting with gender politics in a way that is inseparable from the sound of the track. This promotes appreciation of her actual musical prowess in contrast to the more frequent discussion/appraisal of the female musician's image (*ibid*). This is evocative, again, of the ideas outlined in Section Seven surrounding the need to escape from the limitations of conventional 'human' modes of representation. One crucial factor that renders vocoders a powerful tool in the disruption of patriarchal dominance of the music business is the fact that the effect they produce is not necessarily jarring or disturbing, but rather features a 'deliberately vintage sound' that is a '1970s or 1980s evocation of robotry [rather] than a newly contemporary effect' (Dickinson, 2001, p. 344). This leads to the vocoder becoming a 'novelty' device in popular music, aligning it with the 'politicised form of queer parody, pastiche and performance' that defines camp, which utilises exaggeratedly feminine traits to disrupt 'secure' masculinity (Taylor, 2012, p. 68). Potentially, then, the most empowering trait of the vocoder is that

By pushing current (largely straight male) standards of pop, perfection, fakery and behind-the-scenes mechanisation in unusual directions, a vocoder, like other camp objects, might complicate staid notions of reality, the body, femininity and female capability, [contributing] to more egalitarian hegemonic shifts within pop's role in identity construction. Camp has always been about making do within the mainstream, twisting it, adoring aspects of it regardless, wobbling its more restrictive given meanings – something which this reading of the vocoder undoubtedly does too (Dickinson, 2001, p. 345)

By amplifying the ‘camp’ reputation of the vocoder in contemporary music, women and marginalised gender groups are able to queer the male-dominated standards of popular music, while gaining wider recognition for their musical virtuosity.

Loza’s 2001 article about sampling is more pessimistic about the implications of vocal science for female representation. As explained in Section Seven, she refers to the methodology of sampling in similar terms to the ‘inorganic probe’ metaphor developed by Dickinson, believing that the ability of a producer to sample and manipulate (through pitch-shifting, cut-ups or repetition) the voice – and thus identity – of a diva does not grant the singer a cyborgian liberation from patriarchal supremacy. Rather, it ensnares the diva in a male-generated technological universe, turning her into a literal sonic object: a ‘fembot’. The posthuman diva is thus ‘afflicted with terminal sexuality. Her sexed-up samples lasciviously lampoon the hetero-natural but often remain defined by its dualistic deformations, [...] parodying the natural’ (Loza, 2001, p. 352). Despite the introduction of the digital into her voice, she does not gain the freedom from gendered representation promised by cyborgian theory. In fact, her femininity is contrarily enhanced and foregrounded by the autonomous male presence, as ‘the salacious fembot allows heterosexual males to contemporaneously manage the threats posed by rampant technology and unbridled female sexuality’ (Loza, 2001, p. 351). It is, in other words, a method through which the patriarchy is able to re-establish dominance in the face of potential threats from feminism, queer cultures and posthumanism. However, Loza does acknowledge several exceptions to this, notably within queer dance communities. She explains that the ‘over-the-top sexual theatrics’ located in the repetitions and pitch-shifted vocals of sampled divas have the potential to ‘queer musical space’ (Loza, 2001, p. 354), evoking the example of ‘Drama’ by Club 69. The track

questions the given-ness of sexual biology by mutating Cooper’s bitchy feminine purr into the petulant voice of a gay-coded drag queen. [It] begins with the queer male diva [before] the fierce female diva takes over, [but] her voice deepens and begins to quiver. [...] By turning Cooper into a *de facto* transvestite, ‘Drama’ deconstructs the

naturalness of binary sex and gender distinctions. [...] The feminist force of transvestitism's critique derives not from its reversal of gender roles, but 'because it denaturalises, destabilises, and defamiliarises sex and gender signs' (Loza, 2001, pp. 354-355)

This technique is not unlike the gender disruptions of Mykki Blanco analysed in the previous section, albeit transplanted into sonic rather than representational formats. The posthuman diva may not be entirely capable of escaping the parameters of patriarchy that are reinforced by controlling a woman's voice, but 'her sonic drag encourages dancers to put-on foreign sexualities and try-on unfamiliar desires' (Loza, 2001, p. 355). Loza concludes by arguing that 'instead of dreaming of disembodiment [as is the posthuman ideal], we need to work at embodying flexible [and] performative sexualities [that] confront the cultural signs [that limit] our desires' (Loza, 2001, p. 356). The technological disembodiment of the diva merely renders her another tool of patriarchy; it is her distorted voice's replication of denaturalised and defamiliarised genders that offers an escape from binary conservatism.

Auner's "'Sing it for me": Posthuman ventriloquism in recent popular music' (2003) describes the employment of digitised voices as a form of puppetry in which the vocals, despite their apparent anthropomorphism, are an automated 'staged narrative', with their prevalence masking the presence of a human 'pulling the strings' (Auner, 2003, p. 100). Auner is interested in the 'implications for how both poles in the relationship [between human and machine] are being reconfigured through the process of their fusion' (Auner, 2003, p. 101). He foregrounds the emotion that is a crucial element of the 'staged narrative' constructed by vocal scientists. Using the example of the spaceship's computer HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1971), he asks: 'why is it that [...] HAL's voice becomes more and not less poignant as its mechanical and artificial characteristics are foregrounded through the sinking pitch and extreme *ritardando*?' (Auner, 2003, p. 103). He draws on Hayles and Haraway in response to this, arguing that the 'flawed and imperfect voice[s]' of automatons remind an individual of the unstable nature of their 'own autonomy' (Auner,

2003, p. 114). In contrast with ‘artificial intelligence’ (which merely mirrors the traits of humanity, enhancing one’s belief in a secure identity and a superiority over machines), ‘a voice that obviously lacks a self’ is disturbingly synthetic and uncanny, invoking the fleeting nature of existence and the instability of identity (ibid). The absence of humanity in hyper-digital voices provides a vocal timbre devoid of the limitations of ‘irony’, enabling automatons to make poignant and emotive statements without fear of being ‘distrusted’ or facing ‘embarrassment’ (Auner, 2003, p. 115). Despite their cold and inhuman nature, there is something representationally authentic about machines whose ‘staged narrative’ is openly robotic, as opposed to synthetically human-like. On one level, this is due to a fear of the unknown and an apparent inability to truly understand the ‘identity’ of technology that shares little in common with organic life. However, as is argued below, there is also an element of intimacy that defines the Post-Internet generation’s relationship to their technological devices. Holly Herndon has suggested that ‘the way in which we interact with these technologies is altering our physical and emotive states, and in turn technologies are responding to these developments’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014), and this deep connection can be found in the empathetic location of authenticity in robotic voices.^{xxxiv}

I now analyse the work of musicians whose experiments with vocals embrace the theories and techniques outlined above, while furthering these debates in relation to digital queer, information noise and Post-Internet culture. Harper argues that

A major characteristic of twenty-first century pop music, especially underground, is the erosion of that former distinction between the human voice and the musical landscape in which it stands, especially digitally, and of which it now forms a part. No longer is the voice merely a figure in the landscape, but it fuses with the landscape itself. [This] has consequences for the way we consider the voice as a representation of a person in their place in the emerging digital world (Harper, July 2014)

Several musicians are interested in this difficulty between separating ‘the human voice’ (as a symbol of an individual’s identity) from the Post-Internet ‘musical landscape [...] of which it now forms a part’, and their approach to vocal science evokes this cyborgian fusion. Avant-

grime producer Visionist's work is notable for its insularity, contrasting with the more 'abstract reaction to, and remediation of, the fragmented excess of modern life [that inspire] Nguzunguzu's eclectic' palette,²⁹⁰ but no less preoccupied with the impact that information noise has on the self (Kretowicz, August 2013). The tracks on his breakthrough EPs *I'm Fine* and *I'm Fine Part II* (Lit City Trax, 2013; 2014) are skeletal and ethereal compositions 'constructed almost completely of vocal samples' (ibid). Visionist 'chop[s] up and rework[s]' sampled *a capella* vocals from 'mainly R&B' singers, before manipulating each note's pitch and length by 'playing' them on a keyboard (Cohen, January 2014). These vocal notes are then distorted and arranged into a grime-like structure, with the samples being reshaped to 'sound like [they are saying] something else', with both 'lyrics [and] tone of voice' being crucial (Kretowicz, August 2013). The two EPs conceptually replicate the emotional stages of the grieving process, and the multi-layered and reverb-saturated vocals generate an uncanny emotive response not unlike that described by Auner. This sentimentality is enhanced by the implied after-effect that Visionist is aiming for by suspending the dehumanised samples in these digital tracks; listeners are supposed to be hearing the anguished cries of the 'ghosts in the machine' (Koestler, 1967), as if the voices (identities) of these anonymous R&B vocalists are trapped within the digital realm. This is Visionist's impressionistic evocation of the Post-Internet condition that has dissolved dualist ideas of a real and a virtual self. Visionist's 'vocalists' are simultaneously human and digital, just like the identities of his listeners. The minds and selves of contemporary web users are hybridised with the logic and imagery of digital environments, while technologies such as smartphones and tablets are like prosthetic limbs, ever-present and seemingly necessary for one's functionality (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). This engages with the trend in Post-Internet art toward addressing the increasing prominence of digital culture and technology in everyday existence. The pitch-shifting in his vocals also

²⁹⁰ Nguzunguzu are focused on in the next section.

has a queering effect reminiscent of those theorised by Loza above. However, instead of simply rendering the voices androgynous, Visionist's manipulation attempts to remove the concept of gender entirely by granting his vocals an otherworldly and ectoplasmic sensitivity. These semi-obsured figures could be any contemporary individual, their identity muddled and transformed by excessive contact with the Internet. The effects on the vocals render them simultaneously ethereal and intimate, thus granting them qualities that (despite their connections to grime) are evocative of choral classical music. The traditionally pure, authentic form of musical expression that defines *a capella* choral music is seemingly untainted by the pressures of digital instrumentation or, indeed, contemporary technology, and retains a 'humanity' that is conservative, emotional, religious and, indeed, romantic. By dissecting these hyper-emotive vocals in a digital setting, looping them until they become robotic and dehumanised, and ultimately presenting them in a style (electronic club music) that has been connected to theories surrounding posthumanism and dissolution of the self,²⁹¹ Visionist takes Auner's ideas about human empathy for a machine's vocal sensitivity into a Post-Internet context. Visionist's Post-Internet fans are thus reminded of the post-millennial blurring of the boundaries between their own organic and virtual selves.

Many Post-Internet musicians have critiqued the role of autotune in the construction of female pop identity, while continuing to explore the Post-Internet and information noise more widely. Laurel Halo's 2012 album *Quarantine* (Hyperdub) also sets vocals adrift in digital spaces, but she utilises her own voice rather than sampling from elsewhere. The virtual environments developed by Halo successfully emulate the feelings of loneliness, entrapment and disorientation supposedly generated by information noise.²⁹² Halo's *Quarantine* is an 'abstract', 'awkward' and intricate puzzle 'of technological colour' (Barrow, June 2012, pp. 49-50). Its sound is not unlike the complex, mathematical creations of IDM artists such as

²⁹¹ This is a recurring theme of this thesis.

²⁹² This is examined in Section Two's focus on the Post-Internet condition.

Autechre or Squarepusher, albeit without the same emphasis on danceable beats. Indeed, reviewers have suggested that, despite the album undeniably being ‘a pop record’ thematically, its musical backing is more in line with the avant-garde ‘Thomas Köner/Porter Ricks/Christian Fennesz school of intricate sound design’ (Gibb, May 2012). This lends the album a hyper-digital and deliberately sterilised aura. This sterility, formed from the expansive employment of static, sonic references to 1990s Detroit techno, and an arithmetical approach to composition, results in a hyper-digital palette that grants the record a cybernetic quality. Many Post-Internet musicians have developed a sound that is build on the pan-global channels of influence available to artists online, and the style of Total Freedom, Jam City, etc. is designed to be intrinsically cold, harsh, glitch-fuelled, inconsistent and mutable.²⁹³ This technique clearly inspires the abstract instrumentation of *Quarantine*. Halo’s treatment of her own intimate vocals intentionally clashes with these background aesthetics. Vocally she

has spoken in interviews of intentionally avoiding the use of pitch correction or digital voice enhancement, precisely so that all the textural qualities and slight imperfections of the human voice are laid bare for all to hear. She’s frequently buffeted by the whirl of her surroundings, and misses a note or catches a breath, subverting the accepted pop wisdom of perfect pitch/perfect timing (Gibb, May 2012)

Crucially, the lyrics on *Quarantine* mirror generic pop songs, lamentations to failed relationships and expressions of love. Yet despite the ‘pop’ style of her subject matter, she has deliberately negated to utilise voice manipulation technologies such as autotune. Her untreated vocals are situated at the very top of the mix,²⁹⁴ rendering them provocatively unavoidable and confrontational. The juxtaposition of the digital sheen of her soundscapes and the imperfect and very human vocals points to the major theme of Halo’s work: that of being lost in the virtual realm. By leaving her vocals untreated in direct contrast to their

²⁹³ Section Nine highlights this jarring ‘information noise’ aesthetic in more depth, but it is worth mentioning briefly here.

²⁹⁴ This is unusual for pop music, which is more commonly defined by songs that feature vocals non-confrontationally floating in the middle of the mix.

surroundings she emphasises the symbiosis between human and digital in Post-Internet culture. She sings of love, loss, happiness, sadness; organic emotions that have been enveloped and, indeed, appropriated by the cybernetic space that she inhabits. As highlighted in Section Six's analysis of social media, the Post-Internet generation shares so much personal information about themselves (or at least, a carefully-curated version of themselves) online that the web becomes a literal extension of their feelings, their psyche, their emotions, and their identity. *Quarantine* illuminates this relationship by amplifying the human nature of Halo's vocals and juxtaposing them aggressively with the disruptive, glitch-driven, hyper-electronic soundscapes beneath. There are similarities here to the personal abstraction of Arca's *Xen*, but Halo's clashing sounds have a more dystopian and fear-inducing aim. While her voice is occasionally digitised, merging briefly with the cybernetic in a supposed promise of posthuman freedom, this is always temporary. The vocals consistently return to their position at the top of the mix, cracking with (literally) the inability to reach certain notes and (symbolically) the pressure of being trapped between the real and the virtual. As Gibb explains, 1990s pro-Internet propaganda 'suggested it was perfectly plausible just to get your feet wet while glibly sliding across the surface of the data sea – without fear of getting snagged on seaweed, eviscerated by a shark or simply plunging headlong into its murky depths' (ibid). Halo problematises this by stressing the isolation that individuals experience online, revealing that the Post-Internet condition is partially defined by the current generation becoming inescapably 'snagged' by digital spaces. As Scott notes, the mentality promoted in early Internet promotional discourse was one 'of disembodiment, a move away from the corporeal self', yet what has actually 'happened is that it's been literally incorporated' and become symbiotic (Scott, quoted in John, 2015). *Quarantine*, in its authentic depiction of information noise in the Post-Internet era, brings into focus the realisation that the Internet is now ubiquitous and absolutely inseparable from physical spaces and the 'real world'. In the

words of Nathan Jurgenson, ‘there’s nothing anti-human about technology: the smartphone that you rub and take to bed is a technology of flesh. Information penetrates the body in increasingly more intimate ways’ (Jurgenson, 2014).

Holly Herndon hybridises the aesthetics of Visionist/Laurel Halo with the ideas of Jurgenson while offering an academic exploration of Post-Internet identity. Her works ‘Chorus’ (2014) and ‘Home’ (2014) draw on the ‘intimate [but] naïve romance’ that she maintains with contemporary technology (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). ‘Chorus’ is built almost entirely from vocal samples, with Herndon suggesting that ‘the voice is [...] the original instrument, and is a means to generate empathy easily, and something useful and clarifying to abstract away from in that sense’ (ibid). Herndon’s vocals ‘are from several different sources – online browsing, synthesis, my own processed voice, samples, etc. all recorded through my laptop’ (*Ableton*, February 2014). Each of these voices is dissected, manipulated and fused with the others to create a vocal collage that represents Herndon’s identity online. The voices are not selected randomly, but are chosen by ‘a system which [spies] on my own online browsing, sample[s] the material, and smash[es] it together. It basically takes material coming in from my browser and analyses amplitude peaks to trigger interesting interactions between the material’ (ibid). As such, the voices on ‘Chorus’ form an uncanny figure; the song is, in effect, a personal and sincere image of the artist as drawn by her own technology. The browsing element of this work is ‘one of the most interesting aspects’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). On one level, the ‘image’ that Herndon’s technology has constructed of her appears entirely digital. It is, of course, generated from online sounds and samples, presented in a wholly electronic piece of music. However, by forming a collage from her own personality traits, actions and tastes, Herndon has created a posthuman version of herself in musical form. This approach extinguishes the dominance of ‘conventional divisions – between the natural and the synthetic, [...] the everyday and the

extraordinary' (Kalev, February 2014), and crucially, between human and automaton, online and offline. The identity developed in 'Chorus' is not entirely human – it is a representation of Herndon – but its accurate sourcing and amalgamation of human traits, combined with the emotive nature of its sounds, also prevent it from being wholly digital. The track itself is a Post-Internet artwork, oscillating between the reality of organic existence and the virtual nature of the web and revealing the two to be intrinsically inseparable. Herndon regards the ideas of Haraway and Hayles as 'prophetic' but aimed at a pre-Internet audience that was not symbiotically or intimately connected to their technologies. She believes that art must now expand on their early ideas to explore the 'symbiotic and demonstrable' relationship (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014) that people have with technology in the Post-Internet era.²⁹⁵ What Herndon is ultimately addressing is the fact that Post-Internet identity is marked by a co-dependent relationship between digital technology and its users, and that by injecting personal information into their devices web users actually become one with them. Social media, laptops, etc. contain so many aspects of a person's identity that they, in many ways, are an extension of that person: 'I sometimes say that my laptop knows me better than I know myself' (Herndon, quoted in *Ableton*, February 2014). This personal connection to her output and to her technological devices is further evidence of the honesty that is a critical aspect of Post-Internet musical production. She raises many notable issues in her work, including an acknowledgement that it is now practically a necessity for the Post-Internet generation to maintain a carefully constructed image of themselves online. She explains that 'one can never be sure if you are performing or not' on the Internet (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014), and as such one's actions online are self-monitored just as closely as those in real life. To be truly Post-Internet is to be incapable of separating the virtual from the organic, and this is due in

²⁹⁵ This relationship is depicted further in the video for the track, which features a graphically rendered image of Herndon surrounded by computing technologies (Figure 60).

part to the constant uploading (and shaping) of information about one's self to digital media.²⁹⁶

One cautionary note that dominates her work is her assertion that web users have become increasingly reluctant 'to express their true opinions out of an implicit awareness that they are being observed' due to a culture in which companies 'check your *Facebook* profile before they hire you – we have online “permanent records” so to speak' (ibid). Herndon is concerned about revelations regarding 'NSA activity and personal privacy' (*Ableton*, February 2014), and suggests that if her laptop is capable of constructing an accurate portfolio of her interests and activities, any person or agency tracking her online movements is able to do the same. This is the theme of her piece 'Home', which takes the notion of Post-Internet embodiment beyond the vocal science that has dominated this section thus far. The track comprises many layers of digital dissonance with Herndon's vocals repeating lines such as 'I know that you know me better than I know me', while the video features images of Herndon obscured and overwhelmed by logos for various digital tracking programs (Figure 61). Herndon argues that 'my laptop is an extension of my memory and self, it is a conduit to the people I care about and in many ways retains more knowledge about me in one moment than I can muster. “Home” is a breakup song for a naïve romance' (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). As such, Herndon regards her laptop – and web presence – as a prosthetic part of her identity, and as something that is 'fundamental to our lives, we actually have little choice about our participation as [these technologies] become increasingly tied to work, sociality and how others perceive us' (ibid). She thus naturally feels personal grievance when her private digital (but intimate) space is quite literally infiltrated by others. 'Home' is, as she puts it, a 'breakup song' between her and her once trusted communicative technology. This is a typically Post-Internet evocation of the sensitive and emotional relationship between web

²⁹⁶ It is telling that Herndon has collaborated with Post-Internet *Twitter* artist Spencer Longo, referenced in Section Six, given his interest in exploring the relationship between contemporary identity politics and the banality/ubiquity of social networking.

users and their digital devices. These themes are expanded in her live performances, which feature contributions from her husband Mathew Dryhurst, a multimedia Post-Internet artist and theorist. During these shows, Dryhurst

warms up the audience by conducting privacy-probing conceptual stunts via projections from his laptop. [...] ‘I’ll find out who signed up to the event, and if they got a job recently I will congratulate them – genuinely – but of course being presented with that info on the walls [...] creates a strange cultural moment for that person’. [He] articulates the activity as ‘basically this hacker idea of fucking with people in a benign way in order to educate them about how they are vulnerable’. [...] Audience members [cheer] when their *Facebook* profile [is] clicked on from the RSVP page (Brown, April 2015, p. 40)

This technique further enhances the Post-Internet nature of Herndon’s music (the digital is again inseparable from physical reality here, with social media outlets permeating live, real-world performance) while amplifying the importance that virtual environments and online identities play in the ‘offline’ lives of contemporary audiences. Constructing selves on social networks involves constant performance and self-regulation, and these web-based identities increasingly infiltrate physical spaces. Herndon’s work, in absolutely fusing the organic human and the cybernetic posthuman, highlights the resonances of these Post-Internet cultural experiences and imagines the potential for an expanding Post-Internet approach to identity politics and musical composition.^{xxxv}

I now analyse three musicians whose output moves away from vocal-based investigations of intimate and embodied relationships with digital technology, instead evincing Post-Internet aesthetics, cultural traits and memes through their entire artistic practice. The first of these is noise/hip-hop group Death Grips. Comprised of vocalist MC Ride, drummer Zach Hill and producer Flatlander, Death Grips’ sound is abrasive and angry, with their mainstream debut *The Money Store* (2012, Epic Records) considered one of the most extreme records ever to be released on a major label (Walmsley, May 2012, p. 57). The group is preoccupied with digital identity and the corrosion of the self, explorations of which can be located in their sound, lyrics, visuals and online personas. One theme that Death Grips

express absolutely is a self-conscious celebration of a music culture embedded in debates about piracy and anti-corporate behaviour. Since the turn of the millennium, audiences have become increasingly empowered beyond the rise of blogging and social networking. The growth of illegal file-sharing and unlicensed sampling has signalled the beginning of a musical culture that echoes the ‘no rules’ mentality that online existence seems to promote.²⁹⁷ The contemporary milieu is one comprised of memes;²⁹⁸ trolls;²⁹⁹ piracy;³⁰⁰ instantaneous knowledge transfer; hyper-connectivity; and information noise. Many of these trends have resulted in an anti-corporate stance from Post-Internet music fans that have spent much of their lives saturated with the ability to access any cultural material that they desire without cost. The perspective that all music should be free,³⁰¹ that sampling should be open to all, and that the anonymity afforded by online media should provide a platform for private, untracked activity has prompted the rise of ‘hacktivism’, a left-leaning political movement (led by hacking groups such as Anonymous) designed to champion the apparent web-based freedoms that are threatened by consistent corporate dominance. These anti-capitalist factions launch web assaults on various multi-national corporations and right-wing establishments to display their own online power and voice their displeasure at the activities of their victims. They reserve their most aggressive attacks for any organisation that attempts to limit Internet freedoms, as highlighted in their assaults on the FBI following the closure of file-sharing site *Megaupload* (Ha, January 2012) and torrenting network *Pirate Bay*. As noted throughout this thesis, musicians that attain a reputation for authenticity must be seen to resonate with or animate the culture that they originated from. Death Grips succeed in this by embodying an antagonistic, independent and ‘DIY’ approach to dealing with major labels that imitates the fan-curated ‘sharity’ culture outlined in Section Four. Their music, lyrics and visual style

²⁹⁷ For more on this, see Kot, 2009; and Sinnreich, 2010.

²⁹⁸ ‘Memes’ are constantly evolving and up-to-date trends and jokes that circulate throughout the online world.

²⁹⁹ ‘Troll’ is a term applied to both web-based pranksters and cyber-bullies.

³⁰⁰ See the consistent uploading and downloading of copyrighted cultural material, new and old.

³⁰¹ This was a theme of interviews with 18+ (2014) and ADR (2015) conducted for this thesis.

serve to disrupt the conventions of the corporate mainstream. Each of their tracks is formed from shards of often-uncleared samples.³⁰² This is, of course, illegal, but the group are drawing on the magpie-like ‘sharity’ that delineates the music culture of Post-Internet audiences.³⁰³ This approach can be seen in the release of Death Grips’ second album with the record label Epic, *NO LOVE DEEP WEB* (2012). Instead of waiting for the label to launch the album and promote it accordingly, the band leaked it online to numerous free file-sharing sites. Whenever Epic would shut down one route of distribution, the band would open another.³⁰⁴ The release went viral, leading to the label sending cease-and-desist emails to Death Grips. However, the social media-exploiting group mockingly posted the private correspondence on their *Facebook* page.³⁰⁵ Death Grips were dropped from Epic Records within a day. *Pitchfork* suggested that ‘Death Grips signing with Epic was curious from the start, for a band who, throughout its brief career, have appeared uninterested in working within anyone else’s confines’ (Pelly, November 2012). Yet the event achieved widespread publicity and admiration for the group on Post-Internet music blogs and throughout social media. Their popularity on sites such as *Facebook* increased, and the album has subsequently been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times. Lyrics such as ‘We came to blow your system’ from 2012’s ‘System Blower’ suggest that their aim was always to reveal the inadequacies of the current major label structure, and their video channel on *YouTube* expands on these themes through Death Grips’ refusal to adhere to copyright laws or contractual obligations. Every track they have ever recorded has been uploaded to their page, including those released on Epic. This is, in effect, illegal file-sharing, albeit with the permission of the artists concerned. It is simultaneously a statement of animosity toward the

³⁰² Their 2014 mini-album *Niggas on the Moon* was almost entirely comprised of disintegrated samples of Björk, in a style evocative of the sampling techniques of Visionist and Holly Herndon.

³⁰³ This is discussed in Section Four.

³⁰⁴ As if to antagonise Epic further, the artwork distributed with the album was a close-up photograph of an erect penis with the record’s title written on it in marker pen, and Death Grips uploaded celebratory photographs of band members revelling in their attack on their label.

³⁰⁵ More on their use of social media follows below.

mainstream industry and a sign of comradeship with the Post-Internet musical milieu. Their antagonism toward such a dominant force in the music industry and election to artistically personify the contemporary culture of illegal file-sharing and unlicensed sampling has ultimately increased their reputation for countercultural authenticity in a Post-Internet era of self-curation and ease-of-access.

In addition to this, Death Grips' music videos are aesthetically indicative of a wider engagement with Post-Internet identity issues. In the 2011 video for 'Guillotine (It Goes Yah)', for example, front-man MC Ride raps in a car, with the camera focused on him for the entirety of the clip while the background repeatedly disintegrates into televisual static (see Figure 62). The lyrics refer to the fragmentation and dissolution of identity, while the images onscreen depict the pixilation of the vocalist (and his surroundings). Even the music itself, comprised of uncleared shards of samples, distorted industrial beats and noisy synths, emphasises deconstruction. Ride's organic humanity is consumed by the digital culture surrounding him, presented through both the audio and the visuals, which is an evocative visual version of the ideas that are developed on Laurel Halo's *Quarantine*.^{xxxvi} This is redolent of trends throughout Death Grips' work more generally, with the majority of their videos featuring extensive post-production in order to appear 'digital' and lo-fi. The band also aligns itself with aesthetics specific to the web, thus furthering its attempts to authentically express the themes of Post-Internet experiences. The static that pervades so many of their clips is a visual representation of information noise, with the artists symbolically incapable of distinguishing between the organic and the digital. Death Grips' abstract approach to tweets and *Facebook* updates takes the exaggerated critiques of Lil B and James Ferraro and renders them dark and dystopian. When, for instance, they leaked *NO LOVE DEEP WEB* online in 2012, the tweets that announced it veered from aggressively

revelatory to confusingly opaque.³⁰⁶ Death Grips' abstract and dehumanised social media presence revolves around the web's disintegration and subsequent digitalisation of the self. As their producer Flatlander has argued, 'the infecting flow of digital information is designed to keep us "half dead" [by] disbanding our reality into pixelated [images and scrambling] our revolutionary instincts' (Calvert, 26 April 2012). This explains the shards of deconstructed and decontextualised web-based samples that formulate their sound, and the hyper-digital static-saturated images that dominate their videos. By creating an all-encompassing aesthetic style/persona that emphasises the idea that 'everything is static, just eating away at the individual', and employing lyrics that suggest that everyone in the Post-Internet era 'is mentally ill' (Flatlander, in Calvert, 14 July 2011), Death Grips evince a thematic and aesthetic preoccupation with Post-Internet identity that has gained them substantial cultural capital due to its authentic resonances with the experiences of their audience.

18+, an R&B duo comprised of musicians named publicly as Justin and Samia, utilise more sensual techniques to examine Post-Internet ideas and aesthetics. I referred briefly to their interest in avatars and constructed/performed online identities in the previous section, and they demonstrate the concepts of anonymity, posthumanism and an intimate relationship with technology in their work sonically, visually and representationally. They state that

A huge part of [our artistic] content was the idea of identity and constructed identity, and we sort of echoed that with the videos. [It is] an issue that's fundamental to being online and operating online. [...] There's just a difference between the user and then the persona that they take online. [...] The void that's created and the gap between the user and their online identity is really pregnant [...] with potential for interpretation by other people. [...] You don't know who's making this thing, and there's no information given, it becomes almost a participatory event for the audience member as they get to have these wild fantasies of who these people are (18+, thesis interview, 2014)

³⁰⁶ While tweets such as 'The label will be hearing the album for the first time with you' are self-explanatory, continuing the band's aims to disrupt corporate music industry values, accompanying these are non-sequiturs such as 'everyone at once', 'I ROLL THE NICKELS. THE GAME IS MINE. I DEAL THE CARDS' and 'OCTOBOR1stOCTOBOR1st... [sic]' that generate more questions than they answer.

Justin and Samia's interests lie in the ways in which those participating in online culture construct digital identities that are not 'totally convincing', and that are often just fantasies designed to be played out in what is regarded as a safe virtual environment (ibid). Yet one of the issues in their work is the understanding that, in a Post-Internet world, these virtual spaces are not entirely 'safe' or 'fantastical' as they are inseparable from the physical realm. Indeed, as both Herndon and Jurgenson would suggest, web users have an interdependent relationship with their technological devices and are therefore shaped by their 'fake' digital selves. Until 18+ signed to the label Houndstooth and began playing live in 2013/2014 they remained entirely anonymous, giving no interviews and offering no publicity photos. This is quite a common and (now) unremarkable approach in contemporary music due to the apparent authenticity that is afforded to mysterious and elusive artists.³⁰⁷ What makes 18+'s anonymity unique is the fact that the sole representation that they offered their growing fan-base was a selection of music videos comprised of found footage of robots and sexualised alter egos constructed in *Second Life*. As noted in the previous section, *Second Life* is an online role-playing network in which participants generate a virtual 3D 'person' to 'represent' themselves while engaging with others in an animated world. These representations are called 'avatars', hence the duo's favoured use of the term. Naturally, one of the inevitable outcomes of this process is that *Second Life* is largely populated by avatars that are physically nothing like their creators, and indeed the anonymity afforded by these images allows users to behave and speak in a way that may be entirely unreflective of their 'real' identity.³⁰⁸ 18+ were, for a significant portion of their public existence, visualised purely as predominantly female avatars, sexualised through repetitive images of them dancing wearing only bikinis (or even less) (see Figures 63 and 64). Justin refers to these

³⁰⁷ See Section Six.

³⁰⁸ For a more recent update of the ideas surrounding *Second Life* avatars, see the *MyIdol* application. *MyIdol* is a 2015 phenomenon that takes the ability to construct a digital version of one's self into uncannily realistic territory (documented and analysed in Friedlander, 24 April 2015).

images as ‘sexy cyborgs’, stressing again the intimate relationship between one’s physical and virtual (in this case, an avatar) identity; as Samia puts it, the connection is ‘completely natural’ (ibid). Although there is an obvious playfulness to 18+’s approach, they are replicating the idea that these unconvincing avatars are actually impacting on the real world emotions and senses of the Post-Internet generation.

One of the key methods that the duo utilises to amplify these themes is a fusion of virtual avatar imagery and hyper-sexualised (to the point of discomfort) lyrical content. Songs graphically and explicitly celebrate masturbation (‘All The Time’), foreplay (‘OIXU’), oral sex (‘Drawl’; ‘Nectar’) and incest.³⁰⁹ One issue that arose in 18+’s interview for this thesis was the notion of ‘negotiating public versus private’ (ibid). This has become increasingly difficult in a culture in which social media promotes constant self-celebritization (ibid), resulting in a scenario where people reveal far more about themselves than is arguably necessary or, indeed, desirable for others.³¹⁰ This theme drives the ‘extreme intimacy or disclosure of emotion’ of 18+’s lyrical style (ibid). If every feature of one’s self is being placed online, the concept of intimacy and privacy becomes warped, and 18+’s hyper-revelatory lyrics simultaneously celebrate and problematise this issue. Moreover, Mark Fisher explains that the ‘besieging of attention’ brought about by information noise and the straightforward access to nigh-infinite examples of pornographic material online results in a ‘de-eroticised culture’ (Fisher, 2014, loc. 288-293). ‘The art of seduction takes too much time’ in the Post-Internet era, and ‘something like Viagra answers not to a biological but to a cultural deficit: desperately short of time, energy and attention, we demand quick fixes’ (ibid). 18+’s disturbingly pornographic vocals highlight the ‘de-eroticised’ nature of Post-Internet sexuality. As Scott notes, ‘to survive in [the Post-Internet] milieu we’re forced to have this digital presence, even for romance’ and sexual intimacy (quoted in John, 2015). Of

³⁰⁹ Until being forced to reveal their names for publicity reasons, the vocalists went by the pseudonyms of Boy and Sis, a choice that is rendered disturbing through the graphic lyrical flirtation between them.

³¹⁰ This is noted in Section Six.

course, other aspects of digital culture that these lyrics evoke are the ease with which pornographic material can be located online; the rise of fetish and flirting sites and sexting; pressing concerns about an apparent wider desensitization toward sexual violence; and fear of increasing exposure to sexual imagery for underage web users. These are all themes that are encoded in the work of 18+. Essentially, members of the Post-Internet generation have become increasingly desensitised to a 'virtual' form of sexuality that is concurrently deemed to be extreme but 'safe' (due to its perceived presence outside of 'reality'). However, the visceral lyrical confessions of Justin and Samia clash with the hyper-digital imagery of their avatars and remind their audience that, in a Post-Internet world, there is no separation between the sexual fantasies that are played out online and those that exist organically. The virtual self is merely an extension of the physical self; it is not a unique entity that one can ignore or 'switch off' by electing not to use their technology for a period. The Post-Internet generation is always interconnected and sharing an intimate, symbiotic relationship with its digitally constructed identities. 18+, as I have indicated, have since made their names and images public, perhaps leaving behind some of these themes in the process.³¹¹ However, the notion of the Post-Internet has certainly been addressed in their previous work. Their visual style, sonic character and representation coalesce to present a confrontational and hyper-sensual exploration of the effect that Post-Internet issues have on perhaps the most sensitive and authentic aspects of human identity: sexuality and intimacy.

Finally I examine the role that the Internet has played in the identity politics of FKA twigs, who has grown from being a key figure in this Post-Internet milieu³¹² to becoming a successful mainstream artist in her own right. This brief analysis primarily focuses on her web-inspired early output, released prior to the Mercury Award nominated success of 2014's *LPI* and subsequent mainstream press exposés about her personal life. FKA twigs' music and

³¹¹ They have stated that the relationship between the body and the web may now become a key theme in their work, thus allowing them to continue in a similar conceptual vein (18+, thesis interview, 2014).

³¹² She has collaborated extensively, for instance, with Arca and Jesse Kanda.

videos evoke many of the concepts outlined in this and the previous section, combining themes of gender, intimacy and posthumanism. Her videos, much like those of Death Grips and 18+, provide perhaps her most intriguing explorations of Post-Internet identity. FKA twigs is interested in ‘the objectification of the female form’ (Friedlander, October 2013) in digital environments, and her visual creations examine the relationship between online culture and female identity in particular. Friedlander (October 2013) provides the most insightful account of the vocalist’s early work, offering a useful platform from which to begin analysing her Post-Internet approach. Friedlander asserts that twigs’ videos operate in a realm of ambiguity, in which she blurs the boundaries between the extremes of femininity promoted by stars such as Miley Cyrus (‘harnessing her sexuality to get the attention that she wants’) and Sinéad O’Connor (‘reduc[ing] the female body to an entirely private affair’) (ibid). In this context, Friedlander explains that

There’s something reactionary in viewing either of the Sinéad and Miley extremes as a solution to the problem of objectification. It’s there in the clumsy irony of Miley singing about being ‘wrecked’ by a man while simultaneously titillating this imaginary ‘other’ with her tongue, and it’s there in Sinéad’s suggestion that one must hide an entire part of one’s own person in order to not be objectified. Neither option seems to lend itself to the ideal of being able to outwardly embody one’s self in all one’s fullness and complexity (ibid)

FKA twigs’ solution, according to Friedlander, is to take ‘the pop diva persona [and pass] it through her own, distorting magnifying glass. She blows her own sexualised female body up widescreen, messes with its proportions, reveals unexpected contradictions within it’ (ibid) and ultimately generates an image of the feminine form that is simultaneously sexualised and asexual through the use of digital animation techniques. In the video for ‘Hide’ (2012) for instance, twigs appears naked save for a red flower covering her pelvis (Figure 65). This image would be overtly sexual (in the problematic visual tradition of female objectification) if not for the fact that ‘the flower’s long yellow stalk seems to point to an often overlooked parallel between the male and female anatomy’ (ibid), rendering her body androgynous and

queer. Furthermore, the camera focuses purely on her body, with her face constantly obscured from the shot. She is self-consciously anonymised, as if to emphasise that the female body has been treated as a dehumanised, impersonal object throughout visual culture. Without her head, the naked body lacks individuality or humanity. Instead, it self-reflexively and critically represents the notion of ‘any female body’ in contemporary media, presented as an empty sexualised image to be possessed and lusted after by the patriarchal audience. As she has stated in interviews, she is infuriated by the fact that many people approach her in person and exclaim ‘I didn’t realise you were real! I thought you were just this thing on the computer’ (FKA twigs, quoted in Cliff, December 2014). This is a thought process that can be linked to the (literal) objectification of women online. While twigs’ persona is intrinsically entwined with the web, she is determined to equally explore the human (and female) aspects of her public identity. Both of these aspects are, of course, inseparable in the Post-Internet era. The ‘Hide’ video features

what looks at first like an animated computer graphic but is actually a performance by twigs herself, contrast[ing] the gyrations of her nude midsection with a phallic stalk jutting from an anthurium flower that’s covering her crotch. With its confusing combination of masculine and feminine sexual attributes, the video draws in the male gaze as much as it disrupts it. As her hand pauses to caress the flower, it also raises a question: who’s really being pleased here? (Friedlander, April 2014)

Effectively, twigs is questioning the very meaning of concepts such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’, suggesting in her ‘confusing’ genital androgyny that these supposed binary oppositions are actually far less distinct than structuralist discourse would indicate while transforming herself into ‘an animated computer graphic’: a posthuman image evocative of the avatars referenced above.³¹³

Friedlander’s account underplays the significance of web-specific aesthetics in FKA twigs’ ambiguous videos. She briefly refers to ‘the tick-tock motion and blow-up doll

³¹³ For a further example of this technique, see her 2014 self-directed short film ‘#throughglass’, which critiques web-based identity through the lenses – literally – of the digital gadget *Google Glass* smart spectacles.

inflation of [twigs'] face' in the video for 2013's 'Water Me' (Friedlander, October 2013), but does not emphasise the relevance of these distortions to notions of Post-Internet identity. It is through digital animation that twigs is able to contort her features so effectively, and the use of this imagery is evocative of Post-Internet engagements with the role that the web plays in (in this case, female) identity. The video for 'Water Me' is entirely focused on an extreme close-up of twigs' face (in direct contrast to the anonymous 'Hide' clip). Beginning by illuminating her beauty, the camera remains still as she slowly morphs; her eyes, lips, forehead and nose expanding until she resembles a heavily misshapen doll (see Figure 66). On one level, this undermines traditional notions of female sexuality by rendering the features of a conventionally attractive woman unpleasurable. As twigs has stated, the video aims 'to manipulate [her] face beyond what is considered beautiful' (quoted in Friedlander, April 2014). This is reminiscent of the 'alien' and 'mutant' representational playfulness of Mykki Blanco.³¹⁴ The technique also simultaneously reflects the process of voyeurism back onto the viewer. The giant eyes that twigs stares out with by the end of the clip are discomfiting and accusatory in their sadness, with the uncomfortable intimacy of the interlocked gaze almost forcing the viewer to look elsewhere. In relation to digital culture, however, the message of the clip runs even deeper, and it is telling that Jesse Kanda, whose work with Arca distorts identity through digital animation techniques, directed the video. FKA twigs, by disfiguring herself so aggressively, is making a statement about the role that airbrushing and Photoshopping have on contemporary femininity. Her warped face is a mask generated by digital 'enhancement'; it is an unbearably fake and inorganic image that echoes the impossible 'beauty' of heavily filtered pictures and videos of women in post-millennial society. She explicitly states, in reference to the proliferation of publicity photographs of herself, that 'I do not look like that in real life. It's a professional photographer and

³¹⁴ See the previous section.

Photoshop. [...] I want everyone to know it's not real' (FKA twigs, quoted in Shepherd, October 2014). Her videos, then, are a deliberate deconstruction of the impossibly 'perfect' visuals that dominate images of femininity in the Post-Internet era,³¹⁵ critiquing a culture that Fisher suggests is defined by a 'feeling [of] digitally upgraded normality – a perverse yet ultra-banal normality, from which all flaws have been erased' (Fisher, 2014, loc. 2584). Clearly, twigs is criticising the promotion of 'upgraded' digital images of (in this case) women online. As the virtual and the 'real' are inseparable in a Post-Internet world, ubiquitous but unrealistic technologies such as Photoshop and filtering have a dangerous impact on expectations for the physical bodies of social networking young women.

FKA twigs expands on this motif in the video for 'Papi Pacify' (see Figure 69), also from 2013. The video features twigs

with her head cocked back and her mouth almost completely engulfed by the probing fingers of a shirtless male, or straining to keep her gaze locked with the viewer's as a muscular hand wraps itself forcefully around her neck. [It] embodies the vulnerability that comes with [...] exposing one's body to another person, especially as that other expands to include a faceless mass of hypothetical onlookers. It's like we're watching her be psychically and physically annihilated, but there's a bold, hyper-stylized, even auteurist quality to her musical and visual choices, [that] gives you the feeling that she's also fully in charge (Friedlander, October 2013)

The violent, sado-masochistic imagery of the video critiques three forms of entrapment. First, it aggressively highlights patriarchal power through twigs' plight at the hands of the 'shirtless male'. She is being physically restrained, and yet she remains in control due to her authorial role in the song and the video. On a second level, however, 'Papi Pacify' explores the entrapment of on-screen women in a culture in which the male gaze maintains supremacy. She looks directly into the camera on multiple occasions, in spite of her predicament of imprisonment, as if she retains power over her own sexuality despite the voyeurism of her male viewers. She may be incapable of escaping the male gaze entirely, but she is

³¹⁵ This technique is foregrounded further in another collaboration with Jesse Kanda, 2013's 'How's That' (Figure 67), which is reminiscent of the abstract shape-shifting identities that dominate his visuals for Arca, as well as the video for Kelela's 'A Message' from 2015. 'A Message' features sonic production from Arca (Figure 68).

empowered in her refusal to be a passive recipient of it. The third critique is perhaps the most pertinent to this thesis. The video deliberately references GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) style animation in its stop-start aesthetic. While further reference to GIFs occurs in Section Ten, it is worth noting that they are picture files that are comprised of brief, repetitive animated loops generated by storing multiple images at once. They are, undoubtedly, one of the most prominent forms of visual material to emerge from the online era; their short loops have become a substantial part of popular culture. The video cycles through a selection of images of twigs and her co-star, ceaselessly repeating as though the clip itself were literally comprised of GIFs. The result of this is a further feeling of entrapment: one for the viewer, as well as the protagonists of the video. The audience is caught in a loop by the digital aesthetics employed by FKA twigs and, by extension, by the digital realm from which this style of animation originated. Having engaged so deeply and intimately with virtual environments in every aspect of their lives, Post-Internet audiences have ultimately become ensnared by them, with the never-ending GIF of twigs' video providing a metaphor for this issue.^{xxxvii} In her exploitation of exaggerated androgyny and cyborgian animation, twigs is evoking the same 'flexible [and] performative sexualities [that] confront the cultural signs [that limit] our desires' advocated by Loza (Loza, 2001, p. 356), albeit in relation to visual 'over-the-top sexual theatrics' rather than sonic ones (Loza, 2001, p. 354). As quoted earlier, Loza lauds the queer vocal science of 'Drama' by Club 69 because it

questions the given-ness of sexual biology by mutating [its vocalist] into a *de facto* transvestite. 'Drama' deconstructs the naturalness of binary sex and gender distinctions. [...] It denaturalises, destabilises, and defamiliarises sex and gender (Loza, 2001, pp. 354-355)

FKA twigs' videos, by comparably avoiding the limitations of 'binary sex and gender distinctions' through distorted digital animation techniques and pansexual self-portrayals, are the ultimate visual incarnation of Loza's 'over-the-top sexual theatrics'. She provides an authentic image of the Post-Internet experiences of social networking women that suffer

incidents of misogyny and sexual entrapment comparable to those critiqued in her videos, while proposing alternative posthuman methods of self-representation and liberation from definitive patriarchal binaries. Where Club 69's 'sonic drag encourage[d] dancers to put-on foreign sexualities and try-on unfamiliar desires' (Loza, 2001, p. 355), FKA twigs' videos (and, indeed, the work of the other artists in this chapter) provide the same encouragement to the Post-Internet generation.

To conclude the wider focus on posthumanism and digital queer that has directed this chapter it is worth reflecting on the fact that the many artists included here³¹⁶ offer differing perspectives regarding the utopian or dystopian nature of the Post-Internet condition. While those involved in the style of digital queer view the web as a space through which identity can be played with and distorted freely and fluidly, there seems to be a fear of entrapment and surveillance culture permeating the aesthetics of Herndon, Halo and Visionist. 18+ and FKA twigs are preoccupied with sexual politics and intimacy online, and their work provides deliberately ambiguous responses to these issues. Death Grips take a countercultural stance, celebrating 'sharity' online but maintaining an identity that explores absolute consumption of the self by digital technology. Artistic representations of the Post-Internet condition certainly cannot be defined as either intrinsically positive or negative, and that is one of the reasons why they can be considered contextually authentic. The identities and psyches of the Post-Internet generation are malleable and young people's relationships with their technological devices are constantly changing and developing. This uncertainty and ambivalence is expressed in the highly ambiguous and mutable work of these artists.

³¹⁶ I have outlined the digital queer of Mykki Blanco, Kelela, Ryan Trecartin and Arca, the vocal science of Visionist, Laurel Halo and Holly Herndon, and the embodiment of web visuals and Post-Internet cultural traits that define Death Grips, 18+ and FKA twigs.

CHAPTER FIVE: *Pan-global information noise & interactivity*

Chapter 5 – Section 9: Pan-global club music and information noise

The way you can blend [...] totally different genres and make something new [is] very inspiring to how we create. [There's] so much [music], coming from so many different places, [and] the Internet plays a major part in it (Nguzunguzu, quoted in Finlayson, July 2012)

The most important thing [for *Janus*] has been this idea of data loss – being overloaded by data but at the same time not being able to process even the finest amount of it (DeNorch of *Janus*, quoted in *032c*, 2014)

With the analyses hitherto having focused on irony and critique followed by posthumanism and explorations of fluid Post-Internet identities, the final chapter examines musicians whose work self-consciously evinces the interactive and pan-global nature of contemporary communication. In this section I illuminate two sets of musicians whose output is informed by the multiplicity of generic and cultural influences on the Post-Internet generation. Their music is frequently deliberately eclectic – often jarringly and shockingly so – in a direct representation of the self-curation, information noise and cultural decontextualisation that permeate the post-millennial world.³¹⁷ I begin by addressing musicians from the record label Fade To Mind, whose output is stimulated by the diversity of DJ club mixes and the restructuring of spatial and temporal boundaries in relation to influence and appropriation. I then analyse two club nights with connections to FTM: the digital queer-inspired New York party *GHE20G0TH1K* and its Berlin-based counterpart *Janus*. DJs that perform at these club nights take the eclecticism of FTM's roster to greater extremes, creating mixes that are confrontational in their sonic juxtapositions and expressions of information noise. While these musicians are celebratory of the developments that shape their sounds, the avant-garde approach of their genre-fusions is disorienting, impressionistically symbolising the impact that information noise supposedly has on the Post-Internet generation.³¹⁸

³¹⁷ This is documented in Eisentraut, 2013; Carr, 2011; Scott, 2015; and Simonett, May 2011.

³¹⁸ See Section Two.

Los Angeles label Fade To Mind furthers the themes of *DIS* while maintaining an authentic relationship with club music's history, connecting their digital aesthetics to the 'real world' in a way that is evocative of Post-Internet art. Established in 2011 by Kingdom, the label is a collaborative effort with DJs Total Freedom, Prince William and Nguzunguzu all involved from its inception. Described as 'a record label and a movement' (Reynaldo, June 2011), FTM experiments in sound, fashion, parties and visuals. The artists on FTM collapse boundaries between genres, fusing familiar club styles with contemporary (predominantly web-based) sources in a way that echoes channels of communication in a culture of information noise. Although Evian Christ, an affiliate of the label, has suggested that FTM's artists are 'not really that unconnected' stylistically, this does not negate the multiplicity of influences that are foregrounded by its musicians (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015). In a direct reference to their preoccupation with sensory overload and wavering Post-Internet attention spans, FTM artists release their productions in 'byte-sized chunks' (EPs, singles, *SoundCloud* uploads, etc.) rather than full-length albums, reflecting 'contemporary modes of exchange and diffusion' in an era of instantaneous distribution and communication (Halciion, September 2013). They also partake in the digital resurgence of 'mixtape' culture, circulating collections of apparently unrelated tracks that, despite their album-like length, forego the coherent vision and sound of conventional LPs. Further emphasising the role of the web in their work, FTM employ the term 'mixfiles' to describe these releases. By referring to 'files' instead of 'tapes', the label highlights the immaterial nature of MP3-era musical 'sharity'. These distribution techniques echo the fan-curated 'sharity' culture of Section Four, suggesting that FTM is engaging with the methods of consumption that are considered everyday aspects of contemporary musical milieux for their Post-Internet audience.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of FTM's philosophy is the importance that the label places on the Internet as a subcultural 'club' space.³¹⁹ The collapsing of boundaries between digital environments and physical spaces (in this case, the club) is a key aspect of Post-Internet art, connected to Jurgenson's arguments regarding the inseparable relationship between online and offline environments (2012; 2014). Genre cross-pollination is perhaps the most significant element of the label's oscillation between celebrating these club spaces and continuing to express the digital aesthetics of information noise. Affiliated artists Nguzunguzu and Jam City have built their sounds around the combination of conventional club music and online-specific genres. Jam City's *Classical Curves* (2012), both in its sonic and visual representation, is intrinsically cybernetic, refusing the listener any escape into a comfortably 'natural' environment of sensuality or emotion (Figure 70). Jam City believes that the contemporary world is 'definitely an ugly, high-tech' place (quoted in Blanning, January 2015). His album features glossy and hyper-digital textures, mirroring the aesthetics that dominate Arca's music and similarly suggesting a cyborgian fusion with the virtual. However, it deliberately eschews the personal resonance that guides Arca's work. *Classical Curves* is 'almost sanitary [...] in its artificiality, digital post-production removing any blemishes and imperfections in the music. [Jam City creates] an uncanny, cyborg sound that feels neither robotic nor organic' (Bulut, December 2012). This is both the sound of the Post-Internet condition's collapse of boundaries between the real and the virtual, and a sonic allegory for the entrapment of information noise.³²⁰ Four 'structural conditions' of human behaviour are affected by information overload:³²¹

1. Time sensitivity: A key element in the perception of 'overload' is the limitation of time for reviewing available information.
2. Decision requirement: Related to time sensitivity are the time constraints on actual decision making, especially critical decisions.

³¹⁹ See more on this in the third and, most prominently, fourth sections of this thesis.

³²⁰ This is evoked in Section Two with reference to scholars such as Hargittai, Neuman and Curry (2012).

³²¹ This was also quoted in Section Two.

3. Structure of information: The ‘amount’ of information may be less critical than the extent to which the information is structured, permitting the observer to retrieve what is judged to be relevant.
4. Quality of information: Many grievances about ‘information overload’ turn out actually to concern the quality of information or the information variant of the engineering concept of signal-to-noise ratio (Hargittai, Neuman and Curry, 2012, p. 162)

This record is so deliberately cybernetic in its style that it is redolent of the ‘limitation of time’ and ‘signal-to-noise ratio’ that supposedly create issues of isolation, depression and lack-of-focus in the Post-Internet era. It is a collection of ‘love songs for a dystopia in which the technology of motoring and property ads – self-driving cars, *Google Glass*, club soundsystems – have become sentient and extinguished nature’ (Barrow, March 2015). There is no escape from the virtual spaces that have become an everyday part of contemporary existence, and the multiple layers of digital sound that form the labyrinthine structure of Jam City’s work comparably offer the listener no organic respite.³²² Yet this is not a completely inaccessible abstract noise release. The record constantly evokes Reynolds’ ‘hardcore continuum’,³²³ supplanting the aesthetic of digital ‘dread onto very familiar strands of UK dance music’ (Bulut, December 2012). *Classical Curves* is a self-conscious fusion of hyper-digital aesthetics and club-oriented rhythms. Dancing is a physical, sensitive and ‘human’ act, linked to natural and even unconscious responses.³²⁴ As Rietveld puts it, club music is intrinsically and intimately connected to ‘movements of the body’ (Rietveld, 1998, p. 20). In fusing club genres with extreme cybernetic sounds, Jam City suggests that in a world saturated by decontextualised cultural material even an organic process such as dancing becomes inseparable from the digital. The producer asserted throughout his interview for this thesis that ‘we need to start thinking about the emotional cost of a life spent online’ and the ‘loneliness’ generated by being constantly bombarded by ‘information overload’ and ‘Internet porn’ (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). He believes that music must explore the

³²² See Giant Claw’s 2014 album *DARK WEB* for a less extreme example of this aesthetic style (Figure 71).

³²³ See Sections Two and Three in particular.

³²⁴ Colloquially, this takes the form of a groove or sound that one ‘cannot help’ but dance to.

effect that information noise has on ‘the brain’ (ibid). Post-Internet culture is marked by an interdependent cyborg-like relationship between people and their technological devices. No aspect of Post-Internet life is entirely separate from the virtual. This includes issues such as the corrupted sexuality located in 18+’s work and, here, the dancing inspired by Jam City’s output. Even an ‘authentic’ musical subculture that Jam City clearly feels a connection to – that of the rave/club – is tainted by information noise, with the intimacy of dance and romantic sensuality of live communicative experiences becoming increasingly afflicted by ever-present communicative technologies.³²⁵ Jam City is, in effect, being just as critical as PC Music and affiliated musicians, albeit in relation to information noise rather than the virtual plaza. He is presenting what he regards as an honest image of the state of intimacy and sensuality in the Post-Internet era.

Production duo Nguzunguzu also juxtaposes elements of the hardcore continuum with aesthetics developed within the digital underground. As members Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda note,

The way you can blend [...] totally different genres and make something new [is] very inspiring to how we create. [...] What attracts us [to] music is that there’s so much of it, coming from so many different places, [and] the Internet plays a major part in it. [...] It’s so much more readily available, [and] it’s amazing what you can do (Nguzunguzu, quoted in Finlayson, July 2012)

Their entire sound is one of eclectic appropriation. Drawing together pan-global sounds such as grime, R&B, kuduro, hip-hop, reggaeton, footwork, moombahton and house is simultaneously a self-conscious choice and an inevitable development of their existence within a culture of ease-of-access and decontextualisation. They complement this multiplicity of sonic references with sounds from web-based genres such as vaporwave.³²⁶ Their eclecticism has resulted in much confusion about the duo’s own categorisation, leading to the

³²⁵ These themes have since been explored in further depth on Jam City’s follow-up release *Dream A Garden* (2015), which employs a wholly oppositional sonic aesthetic (intimate lo-fi pop ballads) to make a similar point about alienation and the dangers of information overload.

³²⁶ See Section Five.

critical application of abstract labels including ‘tropical/global bass, trap [and] seapunk’ (Bussolini, January 2013). Crucially, these attributed genre names are ‘web-era’ or ‘blog’ genres, each of which grew out of blogging discussions and/or digital collaboration. They are, in essence, sounds that are specific to the Post-Internet musical milieu. Nguzunguzu’s generic fusion has thus enabled them to develop a reputation for creating forward leaning web-specific music, despite their on-going appropriation of historic club styles alongside these ‘Post-Internet’ sounds. Audiences are ‘tricked’ into regarding their music as definitively ‘digital’ (Martin, July 2014). The intertextuality of Nguzunguzu is not pastiche or ironic referentiality; rather, it is presented in a celebratory way that self-consciously revels in the processes and effects of information noise. An unprecedented amount of cultural material is available to audiences, and the duo exploits this to such a degree that their sound mirrors the multiplicity of the present. By drawing on a multitude of stimuli without limitations of classification/distinction, the duo evokes fan-curated music cultures.³²⁷ Post-Internet audiences curate their own music tastes, without the need for journalistic input, due to their instinctive comprehension of social media and blogging systems. These playlists are not restricted by space and time, resulting in decontextualised music from diverse eras and scenes clashing with one another.³²⁸ While retromanic critics refer to this as a ‘crisis of over-documentation’, generating an audience that is incapable of distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ music with no interest in the wider contextual issues that informed the music that they listen to,³²⁹ digitally-attuned Post-Internet artists such as Nguzunguzu celebrate the diverse channels of influence that accompany these developments.³³⁰ Their sound is intrinsically virtual and digital, which connects it to the web spaces that inform their work. Yet unlike the dystopia of Jam City, Nguzunguzu employ these stylistic devices in genuine

³²⁷ This is outlined in Section Four.

³²⁸ This has been rendered even more prominent due to the popular use of shuffling options on portable music playing devices.

³²⁹ See Section One.

³³⁰ See Eisentraut, 2013; Scott 2015; Carr, 2011; and Levitin, 2014.

admiration for the ways in which contemporary communication and distribution channels have provided novel methods for creating new sounds influenced by pan-global music that, pre-Internet, was inaccessible to the audiences that can now locate them with ease.^{xxxviii}

FTM and *DIS*-affiliate Fatima Al Qadiri is also interested in formulating an all-encompassing multi-cultural music, amplified by her blog for *DIS Magazine*, *Global .Wav*.³³¹ *Global .Wav* is described by *DIS* as a presentation ‘of music videos worthy of attention from around the world’, and involves Al Qadiri selecting and exhibiting obscure and diverse music located during her in-depth exploration of *YouTube*. She stated that the blog

was an early experiment [that] was representative of *DIS* [as] a magazine that wants to explore the world in whatever shape or form. [...] They have contributors from everywhere. So *Global .Wav* reflected that, but it also reflected my interests at the time. At a time when *YouTube* was less corporate (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014)

The accessibility of multiple strands of influence found in the Post-Internet musical milieu is critical to the blog. It exemplifies both the global approach of *DIS* and the ease-of-access culture generated by *YouTube* in its early days (pre-*Google* takeover). This is emphasised through the often-humorous diversity of musical styles represented, including Iranian all-female witch house (Silhouettt); Syrian satirical techno mash-ups (Bashar & Gazfy Deuo); Japanese transgender metal (Aicle); and German Rastafarian S&M eurodance (K2). These artists are never mocked or belittled. Rather, they are celebrated due to their evocation of shifting patterns of influence in a culture of pan-global information noise. These musicians, regardless of background, have been exposed to dominant but disparate western music styles found online, while Al Qadiri has located and exhibited their work in ways that would not have been possible prior to digital communication technology. It is telling that Al Qadiri lost faith in the aims of the blog around the time that *YouTube* became more ‘corporate’ (ibid). It was seemingly ‘authentic’ to explore these channels of inspiration when browsing streaming sites did not render users complicit in the commoditisation of web-based sharing of cultural

³³¹ *Global .Wav* was most active in 2010-2011 and has been updated on a less regular basis since then.

material; in other words, when *YouTube* was fan-curated rather than corporation-curated. As the Internet has become increasingly commoditised – morphing into the virtual plaza – artists such as Al Qadiri have continued to acknowledge the prominence of pan-global influence, but they have become more sceptical about the corporate nature of the hub in which information noise circulates.^{xxxix}

These interests inspired Al Qadiri and Nguzunguzu to form Future Brown alongside J-Cush.³³² Future Brown's output is the ultimate embodiment of the themes outlined above. The group's logo references *Facebook* (Figure 72), celebrating the role 'of the web as an environment in which their brand of music thrives' (Halciion, September 2013) while simultaneously re-appropriating the visual imagery of a corporate Internet company. Their sound is 'highly polished, eminently accessible, yet stranger than any underground production' (*Because*, September 2013). The group 'embraces mainstream web-age culture head-on, glorifying in its glossy surfaces and bold musical gestures without lapsing into the ironic posturing commonly associated with underground takes on the overground' (ibid). They fuse popular styles such as hip-hop, grime and R&B with the virtual sounds of Nguzunguzu and Jam City, comparably echoing pan-global channels of communication. The video for 2014 single 'Vernáculo' is comprised of corporate Post-Internet imagery. As its press release states, 'appropriating the advertising language of global beauty brands such as L'Oreal and Revlon, "Vernáculo" is an exercise in capitalist surrealism' (*PAMM*, 2014). This concept of capitalist surrealism³³³ is inspired by the notion of the virtual plaza. The clip advertises 'Future Brown' as a new form of tanning product (see Figure 73), while merengue/kuduro vocalist Maluca evocatively models the fictitious brand throughout (alongside other glamour models). Hyper-vivid and glossy, the visuals pastiche the

³³² J-Cush is the label-head of Lit City Trax (the imprint that distributed Visionist's *I'm Fine* and *I'm Fine Part II*) and, significantly, the former musical editor of *DIS*.

³³³ This concept is illuminated in Section Two in relation to vaporwave, and in the appendix in reference to Telfar's fashion designs.

gentrification of corporate dominance in the virtual plaza, ‘critiquing the commodification and homogenisation of global variance’ while acknowledging the group’s ‘own role within a digital led arena of expanding horizons and shrinking distances’ (Bliss, March 2015). The group collaborates with vocalists and appropriates genres from many eras and locations in a reproduction of these ‘shrinking distances’. Maluca’s Portuguese vocals amplify the pan-global nature of Future Brown’s approach, while the group also worked with early-2000s UK grime legends Roll Deep on 2014’s ‘World’s Mine’, fusing a cybernetic Jam City-esque sound and sino-grime melodies that evoke the soundtracks to 1970s kung fu films. Other songs feature digital queer R&B singers such as Kelela and Ian Isiah, Chicago-based hip-hop artists Tink and Sicko Mobb, Jamaican dancehall vocalist Timberlee, and many others. The group has become the ultimate example of self-curation as a process of contemporary musical production. Its members are fans of the various vocalists that they work with (Saxelby, December 2014) and have brought them together into one pan-global eponymous album (Warp, 2015) that ignores national, cultural and temporal boundaries. Grime vocals are matched to trap beats, hip-hop connects with footwork and R&B is fused with reggaeton and kuduro. This is treated as an inevitable cultural collapse brought about by the milieu of appropriation and self-curation that is an everyday aspect of Post-Internet music cultures.^{xl}

As Harper has argued, ‘where something points from or to is less important than how it moves’ in contemporary music (Harper, June 2015). Future Brown’s work is ‘questioning the relationship between power and classification, [...] offering indefinability as [a] more fertile alternative’ to the methods of distinction lamented by retromanic critics (Iadorola, March 2015). These themes increasingly dominate club music in the Post-Internet era, as eclecticism is ‘more logical than revolutionary’ to producers/audiences that emerged in an era marked by multiple channels of influence and information noise (Yates, April 2015). This ‘logical’

diversity is a normalised part of the lives of Post-Internet audiences, and Future Brown offer an authentic representation of this phenomenon.

I now analyse two club nights whose affiliations with Fade To Mind, Hood By Air and *DIS* inform their exploration of information noise and Post-Internet identity: *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus*. *GHE20G0TH1K* is a New York-based party that is preoccupied with online and gendered identity politics, while *Janus*' most famous resident DJ Lotic has explained that queer representation is also a critical motif in their work (quoted in 032c, 2014). Founded by DJ Venus X and Hood By Air's Shayne Oliver,³³⁴ *GHE20G0TH1K* is an LGBTQ club night that celebrates the fact that contemporary club culture grew from the 'queer nightlife' of 1980s dance music, rectifying the fact that 'queer folks [slipped] out of the established narrative' as EDM became more visible and popular (Glazer, June 2014). Queer cultures' importance to the development of dance genres is largely underwritten in club music's history. Reynolds' seminal *Energy Flash* (2013), for example, begins by celebrating the gay-led disco, house and techno scenes of the 1980s, but its narrative ultimately gravitates toward a heteronormative perspective of 1990s rave and beyond, ignoring the on-going presence of queer club scenes. These established narratives tend to overlook the substantial influence that these necessarily subversive, mutable and experimental scenes have had on more visible and celebrated forms of dance music.³³⁵ One contemporary queer dance culture that has been influential (but largely disregarded) is ballroom house, whose gender-blurring politics have become an authentic focal point for digital queer club cultures including *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus*. Ballroom is a sub-genre of house music based principally (but not exclusively) in New York, renowned for its accompanying 'vogue' dance style (practiced by ballroom's largely transgender clientele).

³³⁴ Oliver's brand, studied in Sections Two and Seven as well as the conclusion of this thesis, juxtaposes conventionally masculine and feminine clothing styles while embracing the queering techniques of *DIS* and a neo-industrial aesthetic.

³³⁵ Garcia's brief, but comprehensive, overview of LGBTQ cultures' relationship to club music is essential reading for more on this subject (Garcia, January 2014).

Ball nights involve ‘primarily gay or [transgender] black men escaping hard-knock lives, battl[ing] each other on the dance floor. [...] Over the last two decades, ballroom has prospered and evolved in [...] the LGBT[Q] underground of the USA’ (Shaw, January 2012). Self-styled ‘ball children’ dress up and ‘pose’ as different people,³³⁶ queering the boundaries between genders and identities.³³⁷ The style has developed alongside more visible club genres, mutating into increasingly strange and complex forms of rave music to match the constantly evolving dance styles of its audiences. It was noted by many of the musicians interviewed for this thesis to have had a huge bearing on their output, most prominently Arca and Lotic. *GHE20G0TH1K* furthers the digital queer style³³⁸ by drawing on the queer history of the New York ballroom scene and promoting a culture that revels in costuming and LGBTQ lifestyles. The party welcomes ‘drag queens, radical black lesbians, young gay people’ and other minority groups (Hoby, June 2012), endorsing the many indefinable and fluid genders and identities that comprise post-millennial western societies and celebrating their differences from one another. It also embraces a Post-Internet aesthetic that is evocative of the ‘fusion of physical digital selves’ in Ryan Trecartin’s visuals (Langley, 2012). Its participants model high-end fashion, cyberpunk-esque luminous hair dye, clothing styles such as ‘bondage, [...] anime, [...] *kawaii*, [and] the Internet’,³³⁹ and the customisable industrial fashion of Hood By Air (Viteri, September 2013). Effectively, as the name suggests, *GHE20G0TH1K* fuses the ‘street’ style of urban genres such as hip-hop and club music with the posthuman science fictions of cybergoth and cyberpunk.³⁴⁰ This collage of diverse influences mirrors the multiple channels of inspiration generated by the web’s information

³³⁶ This is a trend located in the work of digital queer artists such as Arca, Mykki Blanco and Ryan Trecartin (see Section Seven). Each of these artists has strong ties to *GHE20G0TH1K*.

³³⁷ Ballroom was famously documented in Jennie Livingston’s 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*, which is recommended viewing for an in-depth overview of the history of vogue.

³³⁸ This is highlighted in Section Seven.

³³⁹ Each of these styles influences the public image of Grimes, who is examined in the appendix of this thesis.

³⁴⁰ This is a technique reminiscent of *GHE20G0TH1K* affiliates Nguzunguzu, whose sound fuses ‘street’ genres with those generated in the digital realm.

noise, and is a Post-Internet attempt to explore this abundance of cultural material in a physical space. The party thus becomes a cross between a subcultural club night and a Post-Internet artistic installation.³⁴¹ By mixing so many styles in such a vivid and aggressive way, those that frequent *GHE20G0TH1K* highlight the fractious and fragmenting effect that digital existence has had on their perceptions of identity. As a regular member of the party, Mayard asserts that ‘it wasn’t about being one thing or another, but simply being real’ (Mayard, 2015), emphasising the authenticity afforded to both stylistic and representational diversity/fluidity in Post-Internet culture.³⁴² xli

Janus was established in 2012 by promoters Dan DeNorch and Michael Ladner and DJs Lotic, M.E.S.H. and KABLAM in response to their experiences at *GHE20G0TH1K*, and it offers a Berlin-based take on the same Post-Internet identity politics. The imagery that adorns its promotional posters is frequently cybernetic and hyper-digital in homage to *GHE20G0TH1K*’s employment of posters featuring sexualised avatars (see Figures 75-78). This visual style is reminiscent of the work of Death Grips, Arca and (most prominently) 18+. ³⁴³ Critically, both *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus* reject DJing that draws on a ‘narrow scene of producers or one city’s electronic music culture. [...] We’re all more interested in DJs who have their own personas and express that through multiple types of sounds’ (M.E.S.H, quoted in *032c*, 2014). These artists wish ‘to fuck up’ the conventions of club culture by exploiting a vast palette of sources from global music (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014). Their style is ‘chaotic and anarchic’, and it ‘disrupts and disappoints and frustrates’ in a way that renders it representative of the ‘non-linear’ channels of inspiration online (Jam

³⁴¹ Indeed, transgender visual artists such as Wu Tsang and boyChild, both of whose *DIS*-promoted work is preoccupied with notions of queer identity more generally, are frequent collaborators with the club night and the themes of their art have informed, and been inspired by, the work of *GHE20G0TH1K* (see Figure 74).

³⁴² For a full and in-depth overview of *GHE20G0TH1K*’s relationship to digital identity and both gendered and racial politics, it is worth viewing *Vodafone Italia*’s ‘OPEN – ARTI – Chief Boima e Venus X talk (Full)’ (2012) on *YouTube*, in which founder Venus X explains queer commentary and posthumanism’s impact on the celebration of difference and fluidity that informs the parties.

³⁴³ This is outlined in the seventh and eighth sections of this thesis.

City, thesis interview, 2015). These DJs³⁴⁴ develop a Post-Internet aesthetic that appeared in 2013/2014, tentatively dubbed ‘epic collage’ by Harper (Harper, May 2014). Lotic mocked this term during his interview for this thesis, asking ‘what does that even mean?’ (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014). The term does not fit accurately, as it arguably overlooks the club-oriented aspects of the musicians’ approach and infers that these compositions are conceptualised artworks rather than, in Lotic’s own words, a natural result of ‘grow[ing] up with a laptop [and] constantly taking little tiny things from everywhere’ (ibid). However, the evocation of collage as an aesthetic style is admittedly useful for making connections between these abstract pieces that ‘embrace the wayward results of [data’s] sometimes inexplicable flows’ (Iadorola, March 2015). The sound combines

fragments of pop with epic textures and violent sound effects. The framework is avant-garde sample collage, but their work tells stories about twenty-first century experience that emanate surreally from cinematic sound-palettes, transcendental theology and stark, pure emotion (Harper, May 2014)

Among the most influential artists within this style are Elysia Crampton and Diamond Black Hearted Boy (whose sounds are less dance-oriented), as well as the DJs associated with the two parties. The collage-esque nature of their music has drawn comparisons to the early-2000s phenomenon of ‘mash-ups’ (Iadorola, March 2015): tracks generated from samples of popular songs from (usually) contrasting genres.³⁴⁵ However, the differences between the styles are critical. As noted by Brøvig-Hanssen,³⁴⁶ mash-ups are not designed to shock or ‘challenge’ listeners. They rarely become more than the sum of their component parts, as audience enjoyment and humour is generated by the seamless integration of the recognisable source materials (Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, January 2012). These pastiches are melodic hybrids of the borrowed samples – ‘pop’ songs composed of pieces of other ‘pop’ songs –

³⁴⁴ DJs include the three *Janus* members listed above alongside Venus X, Total Freedom, Physical Therapy, Shayne Oliver and many others.

³⁴⁵ See Sinnreich, 2010; Maloy, 2010; Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, January 2012; Boone, September 2013; and Serazio, 2008.

³⁴⁶ Brøvig-Hanssen’s articles offer perhaps the most interesting and up-to-date analyses of the mash-up phenomenon (Brøvig-Hanssen, 2013; Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins, January 2012).

and are products of an ‘Internet’, rather than ‘Post-Internet’, generation that is not as organically attuned to the web’s archival and distribution systems.³⁴⁷ Instead of drawing on the channels of influence that surround them as a normal and everyday practice (as with the collage-like musicians examined here), mash-up artists exhibit clear excitement and humour in their previously unprecedented connection of conflicting styles and genres. Iadorola explains that mash-ups satiated the ‘appetite for new sounds’ felt by retromanic audiences by simply repurposing old material, as ‘instead of a new bass sound or intriguing rhythm, the listener got the shocking rush of hearing ubiquitous songs crossbred in unheard ways’ (Iadorola, March 2015).

In contrast, contemporary collage-esque mixes are defined by their instability, angularity and confrontational sounds. These artists often retain the recognisable popular vocal samples of mash-ups,³⁴⁸ but set them against a discordant sonic backdrop or distort them to the point of being unrecognisable. This echoes ‘the intense experiences and high stimulation of our technologically mediated environment, and the panic attacks and bottomless terror that follows overstimulation’ (Harper, May 2014). The intertextuality of these artists is not pastiche or mere referentiality; rather, it is presented in a way that self-consciously mirrors the effect of information noise and cyborgism. Iadorola explains that³⁴⁹

There’s a striking analogy between what it’s like to consume [this music] and the everyday practice of interacting with the world and our friends through a bunch of different apps and online mediums. [...] Anyone who uses the Internet will recognize the experience of feeling a mish-mash of emotions all at once, in the space of a single screen [and these sounds] are seemingly a by-product of the information sorting we’ve learned how to do everyday as digital citizens (Iadorola, March 2015)

³⁴⁷ Serazio coined the term ‘Generation Mash-up’ to describe the fact that Post-Internet audiences are so accustomed to the omnipresence of mash-ups that they just accept them as an everyday aspect of their lives (Serazio, 2008).

³⁴⁸ See, for instance, the appropriation of Justin Bieber in Elysia Crampton’s ‘Smile’ (2012) and Beyoncé in Lotic’s *Damsel in Distress* mix (2014).

³⁴⁹ Iadorola’s March 2015 article ‘Mash-ups are back, and this time it’s serious’ is useful in its discussion of this emerging trend. However, it is somewhat limited by its election not to separate the style from that of earlier mash-up music.

Each of these compositions is less of a pastiche-based bricolage of recognisable musical sources, and more an impressionistic painting of digital experience formed from the saturation of ‘trash’ that is a feature of Post-Internet existence. The digital queer musician Elysia Crampton,³⁵⁰ for instance, evokes James Ferraro when she ‘describes [her] process as the assemblage of trash, corpses, and shit’ (Harper, May 2014), and her sound juxtaposes ‘the most gorgeous vocal parts of recent pop’ with hyper-emotive backing from contemporary avant-garde composers such as Steve Reich (ibid). The references clash with, rather than complement, one another, rendering them simultaneously beautiful and discordant. They are fluid and malleable in ways that strongly evoke the multiple sensualities of Arca’s output. Comparably, Diamond Black Hearted Boy³⁵¹

mixes together the sweetness and violence of the modern soundscape (music and non-music) in ways that play on the mind and are often frankly distressing. Tracks like ‘formulation of the higher p’ sound like a euphoric but terrifying journey through the claustrophobic sewers of contemporary information. [He] flicks through the wreckage of twentieth century Americana like it was TV channels (ibid)

There is no escape from the impact of information noise on an individual’s identity in DBHB’s tracks: they are ‘claustrophobic’ journeys through the ‘wreckage’ of cultural material that exists online. Unlike the pure entertainment of a mash-up, there is a clear artistic methodology to these tracks and mixes that is designed to critique contemporary cultural experience. This work

cuts across the endless feed of data – the information and images that scroll past our eyes everyday. [...] Nowadays it’s not just music that is readily available to us, it’s everything. We know what the world thinks via *Twitter*, how it’s feeling via *Facebook*, and we can research it endlessly via *Google*. It’s therefore hardly surprising that the media collage of the online world is being absorbed into art practices (Iadorola, March 2015)

³⁵⁰ Elysia Crampton previously released music under the name of E+E, and she has gradually developed an increasingly complex contemplation of contemporary identity that rivals the nuanced approach of Arca.

³⁵¹ DBHB is also known as Chino Amobi, a member of the NON Records collective alongside Angel-Ho and Nkisi. NON is a trio of musicians that use digital aesthetics and Post-Internet identity politics to generate Afrofuturist fictions that elude the colonial language of white heteronormative supremacist culture. These themes are also found in the output of Mykki Blanco’s label Dogfood Music Group, which features Afrofuturist musicians such as Psychoegyptian, Yves Tumor and VIOLENCE.

This is evocative of the transnational genre-pollination of Future Brown and Nguzunguzu, but the abstraction of these collages also stresses the pressures of information overload. As noted by Jurgenson, these influences are constantly affecting the psyches of the current generation. They cannot be safely hidden away online, as there is no separation between the virtual and the physical in the twenty-first century (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014).^{352 353}

GHE20G0TH1K and *Janus*' collage-esque extended dance mixes are tied to physical club spaces, and therefore have more of a 'real world' presence than Crampton/DBHB's compositions.³⁵⁴ The parties' DJs blend 'wildly experimental textures with recognisable mainstream tracks and vocals' (Wilson, May 2014), but they also need to preserve a danceable environment (ibid). The DJ sets of Venus X, Total Freedom and Lotic are certainly harsh in their distortions of the initial source material, but they maintain propulsive and sensuous beats. The (mis)treatment of a sample of Beyoncé's 2013 single 'Drunk In Love' in Lotic's *Damsel in Distress* mix (2014) is a significant example of these DJs operating in this style:

At the eight-minute mark, after a harrowing barrage of low bitrate drums and cyclonic hoover synths trapped in the high end of the frequency range, a silence descends, broken only by the vocal taken from Beyoncé's 'Drunk In Love'. [...] Beyoncé's vocals, swathed in screeching noise, are pulled into a serene bath of chords, and then pitched down into a chopped and screwed negative of herself (ibid)

As arguably the most visible example of two dominant representations of women in popular culture (the 'object' and the 'feminist'³⁵⁵), Beyoncé holds a substantial amount of symbolic

³⁵² For further examples of collage-esque Post-Internet composition, see the *SoundCloud* uploads of Why Be, as well as TCF's awkwardly titled (named in reference to big data/digital encryption) 2014 mix *8B2EE5327B5A0B3373B700A9F5C2A5E40FD9E517DC5F3DBC5498202C55F0E6876B060C5A0E3BEA9BC14F7C...*

³⁵³ The compilation *Blasting Voice* (2012), which was put together by Total Freedom and features many of these artists, is another worthwhile example of these themes in practice. Indeed, it was released as a companion piece to a 2012 New York art installation of the same name that featured shape-shifting performances from Post-Internet and digital queer artists such as Kelela, Wu Tsang, Arca, Shayne Oliver, Dutch E Germ and James Ferraro, suggesting that the collage-informed musical style is intrinsically and self-reflexively connected to the more specific identity explorations of the artists analysed in Sections Six, Seven and Eight (see Figure 79).

³⁵⁴ This is a theme, of course, that is linked to Archey, Peckham and Jurgenson's Post-Internet ideas.

³⁵⁵ This is outlined in relation to FKA twigs in Section Eight.

weight in discussions about the role of women in contemporary music.³⁵⁶ Lotic disintegrates these simplistic definitions of Beyoncé's (and, by extension, female) identity by rendering her posthuman and queer through the use of comparable vocal techniques to those of Visionist and Holly Herndon.³⁵⁷ Beyoncé thus becomes a cyborgian 's/he': an androgynous android that is symbiotically connected to the digital realm. The sonic palette of the mix, which incorporates jarring and grating industrial sounds, amplifies this. As with the clothing of Hood By Air, Lotic utilises industrial aesthetics to evoke the idea of being lost in a disorienting technological world. As he puts it, emphasising his own connection to the virtual spaces that surround him, 'when you grow up with a laptop you're constantly taking little tiny things from everywhere. [...] I'm an editor in a way' (Lotic, thesis interview, 2014). Sifting through the quantity of cultural material available to these musicians may seem concerning to an 'Internet' generation critic such as Reynolds, but to Post-Internet musicians and their audiences it is a natural process and part of everyday existence. They are organically connected to the same archival channels that seem so alien, insurmountable and oversaturated to these writers. Total Freedom takes a parallel approach to vocal samples by Ciara and Rihanna, rendering them cyborgian by placing them within disquieting sonic environments comprised of screams, thrash metal drum solos and abstract noise. His mixes simultaneously formulate a Lotic-esque impression of entrapment within information noise and, contrastingly, provoke excitement about the ability to borrow from a multitude of decontextualised sources. Total Freedom's mixes are arguably the most powerful and innovative examples of the collage-like style in practice. They are abstract, impressionistic and experimental structures reminiscent of a cross between rave and musique-concrète. As Arca explains, 'he's a painter when he DJs. He's like an impressionistic painter. It's like all weird blurs and blots of colour' (Arca, thesis interview, 2015). Total Freedom's mixes could

³⁵⁶ She is studied in more depth in the conclusion of this thesis.

³⁵⁷ Lotic thus arguably avoids the misogynistic trappings of 'fembot' style sampling outlined in Loza (2001) and referenced in Section Eight.

be said to be an extension of Arca's hybridisation of the digital and the personal, fusing intimate dance music with uncomfortably inappropriate sounds and samples. All of these collages are built from an intense combination of both the positive and negative aspects of information noise, drawing attention to the apparent inability to distinguish between what is worthwhile and what is 'trash' while simultaneously celebrating ease-of-access culture. This style is an authentic replication of a world surrounded by social media and unfiltered information noise. 'Our feed-based lifestyles' are beginning to 'manifest as feed-based art', with *Facebook* timelines and *Twitter* newsfeeds rendered sonic through the construction of these avant-garde club mixes (Iadorola, March 2015).^{xlii}

This self-conscious composition of music built from 'trash' reaches its summit with the work of Gobby, whose sound amplifies the unfocused and oversaturated nature of digital environments. Gobby has produced for digital queer figureheads Mykki Blanco and Ian Isiah,³⁵⁸ as well as performing at *GHE20G0TH1K*, but it is his own sonic creations that are most worthy of note here. While there are similarities between Arca and Laurel Halo's abstract output and some of Gobby's more beat-driven music, especially 2013 releases *Fashion Lady* and *Lantern*, his most pertinent sounds express the inability for Post-Internet audiences to fully distinguish between that which is worthwhile and that which is mere detritus. Gobby is an affiliate of media pranksters Hype Williams and has connections to James Ferraro,³⁵⁹ so it is telling that his darkly humorous style is preoccupied with the proliferation of information in contemporary culture. His albums are inconsistent in mood, tempo, texture and generic reference, with *Above Ground* (2012), *Aquarian* (2013) and his mix for *The Fader* (2013) expressionistically examining Post-Internet attention-deficit disorder. Gobby does not offer a comfortable, gradually shifting collage of sound in his appropriation of contrasting elements. Instead, when Gobby described the inconsistent nature

³⁵⁸ Ian Isiah is a designer for Hood By Air, as well as a collaborator with Kelela, P. Morris, Future Brown and Mykki Blanco.

³⁵⁹ Both James Ferraro and Hype Williams are analysed in Section Six.

of his approach for this thesis, he explained that he likes ‘to keep trying different styles of music’ and finds his ‘haphazard kind of style’ less boring than having a ‘specific project in mind’ when producing (Gobby, thesis interview, 2015). He just keeps listening ‘to different tracks in different orders’, often resulting in sequences of ‘really recent track[s]’ alongside ‘really old track[s]’ (ibid). There is a deliberate lack of focus in this disorienting style of composition and sequencing. His work is inescapably confusing, which comes to the fore most prominently in releases such as *Mixtape from the Du* (uploaded in several parts throughout 2014/2015) (Figure 80). This mixtape series revels in its inconsistency,³⁶⁰ featuring tracks that range wildly in length (from four seconds to nine minutes), and a sound that ‘bounds from frazzled techno to gurgling rap remixes to CD-skipping alt-rock. There’s even a track built on [an] answering machine’ (*Fact*, 2013). Bulut asserts that Gobby’s music ‘sounds like it’s simultaneously about to fall apart, and in the process of falling apart’ (Bulut, October 2013). On his mix for *The Fader*, ambient textures, shards of digital noise, cartoon samples, easy listening music and aggressive bass drops clash frequently, often within the space of a few seconds. With this corrosive, shape-shifting and surreal methodology, Gobby is provocatively exploiting the overbearing influx of digital cultural material by creating music that morphs in confrontational ways. His sampling technique amplifies these themes, with Gobby mining *YouTube* and just ‘grab[bing] anything [...] random[ly], [...] like button-mashing’³⁶¹ (Gobby, thesis interview, 2015), while his track titles are generally meaningless and wilfully random, bearing little representational resonance to the actual sonic compositions that they entitle. The juxtapositions in his work occur so regularly and obscurely that the original contexts for the references become completely forgotten and lost. There is an absolute temporal and spatial collapse in Gobby’s work, with samples and genres becoming decontextualised components to be integrated into his Post-Internet crucible of

³⁶⁰ This is exemplified by its self-consciously untidy artwork drawn in *Windows Paint*.

³⁶¹ This is an allusion to the term coined for pressing buttons at random on a video game console controller due to a lack of foreknowledge of the game’s recommended control configuration.

noises and sounds.^{362 xliii} The producer's style is a self-conscious mirror to the 'data smog' of Post-Internet culture (Shenk, 1998). What happens in this world of saturated self-curation, according to the members of *Janus*, is that an endless (re)cycle of 'hype-hate-copy' (Figure 82) begins to dominate contemporary musical milieus (032c, 2014). This process involves audiences locating something new that gets 'hyped' and rapidly circulates online. However, given its quick dissemination and lack of germination, the track soon becomes tired and subjected to 'hate'. The final part of the cycle occurs once the hype and hate have died down and the idea is 'copied' multiple times until it becomes stale and predictable, at which stage the cycle begins again. Retromanic critics argue that there is so much material to sift through online that sounds and ideas are not given time to grow; they are celebrated and discarded far too quickly. Although Post-Internet audiences are better equipped to comprehend this phenomenon, the presence of constant oversaturation is ultimately what Gobby authentically echoes: a selection of incomplete and unfiltered ideas and themes, all released into the digital realm before reaching compositional maturity.

To conclude, the musicians outlined in this section have an ambiguous relationship to the vast quantities of cultural material available to them. Many, including Nguzunguzu and Future Brown, celebrate the ability for Post-Internet audiences to curate their own tastes built on sounds from across the world and create music that is multi-faceted in its appropriation of eclectic pan-global influences. Their fans can see an honest image of their own relationship to 'sharity' mirrored in these artists' output. Similarly, *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus* promote the ability for contemporary DJs to generate diverse mixes that transcend boundaries of time, space and genre. However, what also comes across in the output of these parties' DJs, as well as other contemporary collage-like musicians, is a technophobic concern about the potential

³⁶² Gobby's visuals amplify this aesthetic through the foregrounding of numerous empty references to popular culture. See, for instance, his bizarre, irreverent and often disturbing preoccupation with the surreal puppetry of Nicholas Buffon and Allegra Crowther in videos such as 'Red Seal' (Figure 81), 'Lil Pizza Face Feat. Lil Big Tymer' and 'Aantezeksyll' (all from 2014).

problems caused by this overbearing wealth of material. Impressionistically, the cybernetic labyrinths of Jam City and the harsh and disorienting compositions of Lotic and DBHB mirror the same cyber-entrapment found in the output of Death Grips and Laurel Halo. Post-Internet audiences cannot escape from the digital, and there is inevitable concern about the impact this has on memory, freedom and psychosis. The substantial amount of material available is seen by many to cause inability to distinguish between quantity and quality,³⁶³ and it is this issue that drives the haphazard, but astute, musical experiments of Gobby. His multiple releases, with their disturbing and jarring contradictions, are unfiltered and inconsistent like the information that is consumed by Post-Internet self-curators on a daily basis. This is an inescapable (but not necessarily entirely negative) aspect of Post-Internet existence. As Iadorola concludes, ‘this music could even be taken as an example to follow: instead of being run down by the noise, one can break down and reassemble the barrage of information to shout back at the feed’, thus reasserting one’s own identity through self-curation in a culture that foregrounds an almost overbearing quantity of voices and ideas (Iadorola, March 2015).

³⁶³ See Sections One and Two.

Chapter 5 – Section 10: Post-Internet screens, interactivity and audiovisual music

A number of indie gaming projects [merge] control over and appreciation of the game [and] control over and appreciation of music. [...] Sonic events and soundtracks appear in games that are so abstract that the entire experience is akin to listening to or composing music (Harper, 26 September 2012)

A theme throughout this thesis is the interactive curatorial relationship that audiences have in online musical milieux, whether through communication on social media or the self-curation of blogging and musical playlists. This final section focuses on the relationship between this interactivity and the omniscience of screens in the Post-Internet world, highlighting musicians experimenting with audience interaction and the audiovisual. Alongside the Internet's foregrounding of the visual dimension analysed here, these projects also respond to the 'attention-deficit disorder' caused by information noise by actively immersing fans in multi-sensory environments that demand their focus. Many of the settings for these musical 'games' reference recognisable digital programs, websites and animation techniques to emphasise their authentic ties to Post-Internet culture. These audiovisual structures explore the conversational relationship between Post-Internet artists and their audiences considered throughout this thesis. Although the producers have ultimate control over their projects, having designed them and set their limitations, their interactive 'gaming' aspects generate a significant element of audience creativity. This section is in three parts. The first of these draws on the writing of van Dijk (2012) in stressing the omnipresence of screens in contemporary culture. The second part focuses on musicians such as P. Morris, Death Grips and Gatekeeper who employ recognisable Internet iconography in their interactive Post-Internet 'musical games' (Harper, 26 September 2012). I conclude by analysing the 2013 multimedia *DIS* compilation *Perfect Anything: Reusable Tracks*, a leading example of the way musicians create artistic, interactive websites that mirror the truly 'audiovisual' nature of online musical production (van Dijk, 2012, p. 215).

The increasing prominence of the notion of the ‘audiovisual’ in music discourse is due to the ubiquity of screens in Post-Internet culture. The contemporary western world is dominated by digital interfaces such as smartphones, tablets, computers, televisions, games consoles, etc. These interfaces are principally oriented toward the visual, which is mirrored in their software and output: GIFs, emojis, pop-up advertisements, CGI, HD/3D, *YouTube*, and popular applications such as *Skype*, *Instagram*, *Periscope*, *Snapchat*, *Vine* and *Grindr/Tinder*.³⁶⁴ Van Dijk asserts that ‘the screen is everywhere in the network society. It is not merely a medium for reproduction but it increasingly dominates all communication’ (van Dijk, 2012, p. 214). This has been inspirational in Post-Internet art that explores the relationship between virtual and physical reality. The supremacy of the screen/image has become so substantial that it has demoted alternative cultural forms – ‘face-to-face communication’, live events, ‘text on paper’ and, crucially, ‘separate audio’ – to a secondary role (van Dijk, 2012, p. 215). Indeed, the continuing omnipresence of screens has occurred in tandem with the prevalence of information noise in Post-Internet culture, as images ‘attract [and distract] human attention’ more effortlessly than other formats (van Dijk, 2012, p. 216). As argued by van Dijk,

Screens have become split-screens of several windows and they have become touch-screens for swapping images. [...] The stimuli offered [by screens] become ever shorter and more powerful in an attempt to prevent the slackening of attention [while] video clips and sparkling shows tend to fragment contents. Background information and reflection disappear or are pushed to the sidelines (van Dijk, 2012, pp. 214-216)

Images have succeeded in maintaining pace with the rapidly deteriorating attention spans of the Post-Internet generation because of their instantly gratifying presentation of content and foregrounding of exciting stimuli. Sound, contrastingly, has largely been a victim of attention deficiency. Compressed music formats such as MP3s, dispensed through poor quality

³⁶⁴ These apps amplify the proliferation of the ‘image’ through their promotion of photographing and videoing every aspect of an individual’s life, while consequently contributing to the culture of narcissism supposedly generated by social media and outlined in Section Six.

smartphone speakers, epitomise a general lack of concern for sonic quality³⁶⁵ that contrasts sharply with contemporary fascination with HD film and television.³⁶⁶ It is increasingly uncommon for Post-Internet audiences to take the time to simply sit and listen to a piece of music in isolation from other stimuli.³⁶⁷ As ADR explains, individuals now ‘have multiple browser windows open, all competing for attention and literally overlapping each other’, with those windows streaming music inevitably receiving lesser focus than the immediacy of their more visual competitors (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). Sound’s apparent secondary role in contemporary culture, then, means that music in the Post-Internet world is becoming inseparable from its visual surroundings. Music in online contexts is simultaneously both listened to and ‘viewed’. It has become crucial for musicians to embrace this audiovisual culture, and the potential for interactivity that a space such as the Internet provides, in their art to retain the interests of their audiences. As Holly Herndon puts it, ‘the best [contemporary musicians] are active everywhere. [They are] looking at other fields [and] are too smart and curious to limit their practice solely to music [due to the fact that “music” and “image” are] arbitrary fields that honestly don’t mean too much anymore’ (Herndon, thesis interview, 2014). Instead, Post-Internet musical production has (through necessity, as much as artistic potential) become a fully interactive and audiovisual process. According to Jam City, ‘we live in such an image saturated culture that it almost seems impossible not to allow visuals into your work’ (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015).

The prevalence of audiovisual musical experiences informs the musicians analysed below. Van Dijk’s assertion that screens ‘are able to present image, text, numbers, graphics, and [crucially] visual augmentations of sounds, close to each other and in extremely complex

³⁶⁵ This is foregrounded in the success of low-bitrate streaming sites such as *Spotify* and the relative lack of popularity of higher-bitrate sites such as *TIDAL*.

³⁶⁶ See also the culture of binge-watching television series in bulk, which seems to contradict suggestions of a lack of a focus but actually complements the high-stimulus/quick-thrill nature of contemporary visual media. Audiences feel the ‘need’ to watch every episode of a series in quick succession, as they are so accustomed to instantaneously available information online.

³⁶⁷ This is an issue that drives Reynolds’ *Retromania*, Fisher’s *Ghosts of My Life* and the writing of Paul Morley.

shapes' (van Dijk, 2012, p. 215) encapsulates the methodology through which Post-Internet musicians have approached their audiovisual projects. Much like rock and popular music has been traditionally indebted to – and arguably enslaved by – the LP format (in relation to song length, concept albums, release frequency, touring schedules, etc.), and 1990s dance music was driven by its functionality in clubs and mixes, music deemed authentically representative of Post-Internet cultural experience comparably draws on the 'extremely complex' multi-sensory interactivity of the web. Screens and images are now so multitudinous, mutable and dominant that it is increasingly necessary for *all* musicians to incorporate visuals into their work to attract/retain audiences. In practice, this most frequently results in the purely functional and commercial use of the Internet's visual spaces for self-promotion, with artists and labels creating visually arresting sites and videos to boost exposure. This trend is documented in much emerging literature about online music cultures.³⁶⁸ What is more pertinent to this thesis is the work of musicians that self-reflexively exploit their visual digital surroundings to turn their music into a fully immersive audiovisual experience. Ryan Trecartin is a significant advocate of this methodology. He believes that contemporary channels of sharing and self-editing, as well as evolving ideas regarding pacing and time that are the result of brief video production applications such as *Vine*, allow artists to 'challenge' the auteur-led top-down nature of previous artistic milieux through a celebration of interaction (Trecartin, thesis interview, 2015). This issue has become progressively more prominent in music culture. I note two distinct approaches to this style in this section. First I analyse musicians that employ web programs and animation styles to create 'clickable' and fluid environments that refer transparently to recognisable Internet imagery. The programs' users cannot edit the music, but the straightforwardly manipulated visual environments engage and immerse listeners in ways that pure sound arguably cannot anymore. Second I

³⁶⁸ See Sinnreich, 2010; Laughey, 2007; and Burgess and Green, 2009.

focus on musicians that construct music-streaming websites that illuminate the imagery of the virtual plaza and information noise culture. These sites are effectively digital artistic installations, making statements regarding the Post-Internet condition while presenting the sounds themselves in attention-focusing settings. The artists operating in both of these groupings are preoccupied with the Internet as a palette for both visual and sonic experimentation, and their work self-consciously considers the Post-Internet experiences of their audiences.^{xliv}

There are many interactive environments and musical ‘games’ in Post-Internet music making, representing the self-curatorial nature of the Post-Internet musical milieu. These projects highlight the online relationship between sound and images while studying the role that the web can play in musical production. Harper draws attention to several audiovisual projects by artists in which ‘the control over and appreciation of the game is merging with control over and appreciation of music’, resulting in ‘sonic events and soundtracks appear[ing] in games that are so abstract that the entire experience is akin to listening to or composing music’ (26 September 2012). Many of the projects mentioned, such as *Proteus* (Figure 83), *Electroplankton* and *Pulse*, allow users to manipulate and explore their spaces both sonically and visually.³⁶⁹ However, these games, while interesting and innovative, are not popular music platforms. They are, in effect, audiovisual programs; artistic interactive experiments with sound and visuals that do not share the grounding in popular music that defines the artists analysed throughout this thesis. They do not self-consciously explore the Post-Internet condition in any way, and are more likely to be referred to as ‘musical games’ than ‘popular music releases’. What is of most interest to this thesis is the audiovisual output of musicians that consider the issues surrounding Post-Internet identity focused on

³⁶⁹ Other examples of this are found in Jacob Smith’s ‘I Can See Tomorrow In Your Dance: A Study of *Dance Dance Revolution* and Music Video Games’ (April 2004).

throughout this thesis while examining the prominence of screens and fan-curation/interactivity in contemporary musical milieux.^{xlv}

Possibly the most palpable example of a musician critically engaging with these themes is Fade To Mind associate P. Morris,³⁷⁰ whose two 2014 releases *Debut* and *Beloved* are intrinsic examples of Post-Internet audiovisual musical presentation. These albums are ‘hip-hop influenced take[s] on the [Fade To Mind] sound’ (Ryce, February 2014), but what makes them remarkable is their visual presentation. *Debut* ‘is [...] presented as an interactive environment, designed by creative agency OKFocus [and] sourced from *Google Street View* data’ (Francisco, February 2014). OKFocus was established in part by Post-Internet artist Ryder Ripps, whose work ‘calls attention to [the fact that] the Internet makes us treat ourselves like content, [...] devoting the greater bulk of our days to compulsively baiting each others’ attention online, parcelling ourselves out in photos and 140-character replies’ (Friedlander, March 2015). These are themes that have recurred throughout this thesis, with Ripps explaining that

I’ve been using the Internet since I was 10. [...] I’ve been feeling more fatigued [and] it’s almost become an addiction, where every time I refresh my likes on *Instagram*, I don’t really give a shit. [In terms of] maintaining my own image and presence and feeling like I’m still relevant – it’s become a dependency (Ripps, quoted in Friedlander, March 2015)

Debut provides both a pastiche and critique of this dependency on exhausting and omnipresent visual digital media. It is based visually on *Google Street View*,³⁷¹ an interactive application built from photographs that enables users to ‘travel’ around a 3D rendering of the world. Its popularity has resulted in its visual style becoming universally familiar for the Post-Internet generation, and it has developed into one of the most instantly recognisable examples of contemporary ‘virtual’ reality. *Debut* does not hide its indebtedness to the aesthetic popularised by *Google Street View*, instead celebrating the program’s immersive

³⁷⁰ P. Morris, formerly known as Morri\$, has collaborated extensively with Post-Internet vocalists such as Kelela and Lelf.

³⁷¹ This is a subsection of *Google Maps* and *Google Earth*.

qualities and visual diversity by using many of its most striking environments as settings for interactive ‘music videos’ (Figure 84). Crucially, ‘each song has its own 3D environment: a snowbound ship on “Mood Swing”, a grand foyer for “Turtle Lounge”, a Range Rover interior on “Gemini”’ (Francisco, February 2014), which amplifies the sheer magnitude of the photographic scope provided by the referenced technology. The listener can navigate these glossy and hyper-vivid environments³⁷² while the track plays in the background, with the visuals and sonics working in tandem to enhance the multi-sensory experience. In ‘Mood Swing’, for instance, audiences can click in directions that enable them to ‘follow’ a group of snow bikers for the duration of the track, while ‘Air Over Kansas’ and ‘Submission (Devil Mix)’ allow the user to investigate the interior of unidentified buildings while observing the high-definition views of unnamed cities through the windows. Although the music cannot be edited in any way, the environments themselves provide enough engaging material to retain the attention of listeners for the mixtape’s duration. These are relaxing spaces that soothe and comfort the over-stimulated (and ‘exhausted’) Post-Internet audiences that negotiate them. *Debut* is, in a way, an audiovisual incarnation of the virtual plaza. It is a hyper-digital ‘lounge’, offering a comforting virtual break from the pressures of information noise.

Beloved, also produced in collaboration with OKFocus, provides another unique take on a well recognised and established digital environment: *Chat Roulette*. *Chat Roulette* is a webcam communication program that allows users to talk to apparently random people from across the world. The program is named in reference to the fact that these conversations are brief, with a single click enabling the user to open a new conversation with someone else that they have never spoken to before (and likely never will again). *Chat Roulette* exemplifies the importance that is placed on communication online, as well as the ability to connect with

³⁷² This is evocative of the Day-Glo aesthetics of PC Music and vaporwave.

cultures all over the world.³⁷³ It is therefore interesting that P. Morris and OKFocus selected this environment to present their second project (Figure 85). While *Debut* is about exploration and relaxation, reacting to the pressures of Post-Internet existence, *Beloved* is more explicitly about interaction and online relationships. Users cannot simply log on to the website and listen; they are required to connect their webcam and have a friend visit the page to listen in tandem. As such, the release becomes intrinsically attached to the communication process. Given the presence of cameras and microphones, it is unlikely that two friends will listen to *Beloved* in silence. Instead, it is anticipated that they will both listen to and discuss the music simultaneously. P. Morris recognises that *Beloved* would struggle to retain a listener's focus for its entirety in a world saturated with stimuli vying for an audience's attention. To combat this, he offers a space in which the audience does not actually have to focus, but can still listen to the music. They have the visual spectacle of their friend to keep their eyes occupied,³⁷⁴ as well as the ability to talk casually over the tracks playing in front of them. This mirrors the notion of the Internet as a multimedia space in which visuals, sounds and interactive communication co-exist. It is impossible to listen to *Beloved* without experiencing all of these elements at once. Authenticity can be located in *Debut* and *Beloved*'s engagements with Post-Internet audiences, as well as the projects' appropriation of web-specific material. By seeking to actively immerse listeners in recognisable audiovisual environments, P. Morris and OKFocus acknowledge the importance of interactivity and visuals to contemporary cultural experience. They deliberately reference technologies that are universally understood and utilised by the Post-Internet generation on a regular basis. This renders the projects relevant to the life experiences of those that listen to them, while also

³⁷³ It could be suggested, of course, that these connections can only occur in brief and arguably unfulfilling bursts.

³⁷⁴ The audience is also, of course, necessarily sat at their computer, incapable of going elsewhere while listening.

offering straightforwardly comprehensible interactivity due to the foreknowledge of these listeners.

Death Grips³⁷⁵ have created interactive audiovisual environments that are indebted to the same repetitive GIF animation loops that inspired FKA twigs' 'Papi Pacify' video.³⁷⁶ The two key examples of this are both from 2012: *RETROGRADE* and *The Gif Me More Party*.³⁷⁷ *RETROGRADE* is comprised of a collection of 109 looping animations coded by Jacob Ciocchi (see Figure 86). It is 'an infinite GIF sampler' that allows users to 'start and stop' the images in any order and at any time (Death Grips, quoted in Saeed, April 2012). Each animation includes a brief moving image of the band performing, accompanied by a short and aggressive segment of a track. As the user starts/stops the clips, 'the piece itself [becomes] a musical instrument' that disassembles the original arrangement (ibid). This allows audiences to interact with the audiovisual project. There are practically infinite sonic and visual compositional possibilities due to the number of different GIF files, creating a truly immersive experience.³⁷⁸ This visual experiment embraces online technology to engage Post-Internet audiences and offer them a role in the creation of the group's music. Of course, the audience is never fully in control of the music itself and can only effectively change the order of the clips. However, the interactivity of the visuals grants the user the focus to explore the music more thoroughly, and the project is authenticated in the same way as P. Morris' work through its application of a recognisably web-specific animation style. *The Gif Me More Party* also appropriates GIF motifs, but it uses these techniques in a wholly different way to those employed in *RETROGRADE*. Effectively a GIF-based interactive music video for the Death Grips track 'I've Seen Footage' (see Figure 87), the project is an 'interactive choose-

³⁷⁵ See also Section Eight.

³⁷⁶ See Section Eight.

³⁷⁷ It is worth noting that, as of 2015, both of these projects have been removed from their respective websites.

³⁷⁸ Given the group's confrontational nature, it is unsurprising that they 'recommend the "PLAY ALL" button' (Death Grips, quoted in Saeed, April 2012). On selecting this option, listeners are subjected to a wall of looping noises and images, as every clip plays again and again simultaneously. Their slightly differing lengths cause inconsistencies in the sound, with each loop increasing in dissonance.

your-own-adventure party website [...] directed by We Are From LA and produced by MTV' (Pelly, September 2012). This quote references the popular 1980s/1990s *Choose Your Own Adventure* children's book series, in which readers were granted (limited) creative license in determining the outcome of the story by following the narratives of certain chapters and ignoring/avoiding others. *The Gif Me More Party* utilises a comparable (though digital/visual) structure, but provides far more creative freedom for its users. The setting is a heavily populated pool party 'where users experience a digital [...] swimming pool, inflated castle, water guns, pizza [and more] through the eyes of 50 different attendees' (ibid). By clicking on different people in the 'video', the audience can watch numerous GIF-based stories (with each character having their own experience of the party). Clicking every character is actively encouraged, with hidden 'Easter eggs'³⁷⁹ becoming unlocked by viewing certain clips. As with *Debut*, *Beloved* and *RETROGRADE*, *The Gif Me More Party* utilises familiar web imagery (GIF animation) to present Death Grips' music in an interactive music video-like environment. Although the audience has no sonic input, with the track playing on a continuous loop over the animations, the nature of the project shifts visual 'power' over to the user. By enabling fans to 'choose [their] own adventure', the group allows them to become involved in the creative process, authentically mirroring the hands-on experiences of self-curation and social interaction that are key to the Post-Internet musical milieu.

Another key example of a Post-Internet audiovisual construction is *Exo* (2012), an immersive environment released by *DIS Magazine*-affiliated duo Gatekeeper (ADR and Matthew Arkell) in collaboration with Tabor Robak. ADR explains that the *Exo* 'album and game were created in conjunction and [Gatekeeper] don't imagine either to exist without the other' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). *Exo* allows the user to explore a 'plethora of detailed alien worlds' (Harper, 26 September 2012) from a first person perspective. Audiences travel

³⁷⁹ One of the 'Easter eggs' of most interest to fans was a secret, exclusive Death Grips EP.

through the digitally animated universe, passing planets, stars and galaxies, before arriving on these ‘alien worlds’, whose landscapes range from tropical jungles, to tundra regions, to apocalyptic deserts (Figure 88). The high-definition landscape is a cybernetic exaggeration of virtual spaces, amplified by a sonic combination of vaporwave, club music and ‘science fiction sound design’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). Like *Debut*, each track features its own fully immersive level within the game. Users browse each virtual environment while the track plays in conjunction with their position on the digital map. Although the sounds are still contained, and the audience is incapable of contributing compositionally to the audio,³⁸⁰ the size of the map creates an overriding feeling that the environment and its soundtrack are in the control of the user. *Exo* is, in essence, like an open-world massively multiplayer game (or MMPG)³⁸¹ – without the interjection of other gamers – in that the map is vast and encourages expansive exploration.³⁸² Gatekeeper’s authentic relationship to digital spaces is located in the application of popular gaming styles and motifs to a musical setting. Members of the Post-Internet generation, accustomed to the aesthetics of MMPGs, are drawn to the reminiscent imagery of *Exo*. Its authentically digital origins deliver an experience that retains the faltering attention of contemporary audiences. By placing their musical experiments within an interactive gaming environment, Gatekeeper afford their fans a certain amount of creative ‘control’ over their music, evoking the ways in which contemporary web users have a degree of power over their own listening patterns and musical curation methods. Although, as stated, the original artists retain power over the sounds, users contribute – albeit symbolically – to the soundtrack by browsing the spaces through the use of their own mouse and keyboard, unearthing new music and travelling to different locations each time they play.

³⁸⁰ According to ADR, ‘the user can only really determine the direction of the camera [and] the environment changes rapidly based on purely time-based musical cues’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015).

³⁸¹ Popular games of this type include *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XIV* and *Minecraft*.

³⁸² However, where the emphasis of MMPGs is predominantly the virtualisation and progression of a ‘second life’ avatar (through ‘levelling up’ and engagement with other players), *Exo* is interested in the relationship between visuals and sounds online: the only method of ‘progression’ or completion comes through sonic development.

While there is far from an equal balance of compositional control in the game, by creating an interactive atmosphere Gatekeeper draw on the more conversational relationship between musicians and fans generated by social media³⁸³ and the ‘sharity’ culture of blogging.³⁸⁴ *Exo* thus utilises visuals and interactivity to explore potential directions for future audiovisual music. It could be suggested, in fact, that *Exo* represents the evolution of the music video for the information noise-affected ‘attention-deficit disorder’ generation, in the sense that it holds the focus of its ‘listeners’ through constant engagement with visual and mental stimuli. ADR indicated that this was an inspiration for the project during his interview for this thesis, clarifying that Gatekeeper sought

to combat the short attention span of life online, where *YouTube* and *SoundCloud* players are devalued and skipped through and quickly forgotten. Having to commit to downloading a 4GB file, running it to the point where your computer nearly falls apart, forced into a highly duration [based] setting where quitting or exiting means starting back at the beginning, etc. creates a level of attention and engagement not typically found online. [We] hope people who want a deeper level of engagement can appreciate the extreme alternative that the video game provides (ibid)

The visual and interactive elements of *Exo*, then, offer a medium through which the problematic nature of a musical culture of over-sharing, ‘skipping’ and lack-of-focus can be subverted. It is necessary to focus on the game to fully experience its sounds, imagery and themes. This enhances immersion beyond the possibilities afforded by the alternative – a purely sonic stream – while revealing an interest in engaging with Post-Internet audiences’ experiences in a world afflicted by information overload.^{xlvi}

Another approach to the formulation of audiovisual musical spaces is the rise of immersive websites that present music in ways that go beyond mere promotional techniques. These websites become artistic exhibitions that self-consciously explore the themes of Post-Internet experience. Tsang suggests that, although the Internet has ‘prioritised the visual over the aural’ generally, improved bandwidth has increased the importance that web designers

³⁸³ See Section Six.

³⁸⁴ See Section Four.

place on sound (Tsang, 2007, p. 145). Although his research is primarily related to marketing strategies,³⁸⁵ he introduces the concepts of ‘musical wallpaper’ (Tsang, 2007, p. 159) and ‘interactive looping’ (Tsang, 2007, p. 162) that can be used to describe the methodologies of the musicians analysed here. ‘Musical wallpaper’ refers to music that plays in tandem with the website without intruding on the browser’s experience of the visuals. ‘Interactive looping’ involves a similar process, but also allows the user to stop, start or even, in some instances, manipulate the audio. One example of these techniques in practice comes from anonymous vaporwave artist INTERNET CLUB. As with other vaporwave musicians,³⁸⁶ INTERNET CLUB creates music that evokes ‘corporate background music [being dragged] into the light of attentive listening’ (Harper, 12 July 2012). Their sonic palette involves taking ‘stock music and music from corporate *YouTube* videos and degrad[ing] them [with] reverb, compression or glitchy looping’ (ibid) in a critique of the omnipresent sounds of advertising and capitalism that pervade the virtual plaza. Their website, *Internetclubdotcom*, contains the entirety of their musical back catalogue, which is free to listen to or download. This authenticates them with file-sharing digital audiences due to a self-conscious appreciation of the importance that ‘sharity’ holds within online spaces.³⁸⁷ It also contributes to the vaporwave critique of commercialised, profit-driven music making. What is most pertinent about the site is its corporate stylisation (Figure 89), which is evocative of the simple, ‘once-popular’ web designs that dominated 1990s/early-2000s sites such as *Angelfire*, *Geocities* and the social networks *Bebo* and *MSN Messenger* (Arola, 2010). The site is comprised of huge hyperlinks, over-sized clichéd font styles such as *Comic Sans*, meaningless new-age slogans such as ‘My Purest Heart4You’, glossy colours, Japanese text, stock imagery, and dated clip art of

³⁸⁵ He is specifically interested in the use of ‘instances of multimedia’ or ‘IMMs’, which take the form of advertisements that play automatically when a website is visited (Tsang, 2007, pp. 148-149).

³⁸⁶ See Section Five.

³⁸⁷ See Section Four, as well as Sinnreich, 2010; Kot, 2009 (pp. 25-57 and pp. 242-250); and McLeod and DiCola, 2011.

glowing laptops. This is, in effect, the kitsch imagery of vaporwave.³⁸⁸ It is reminiscent of outmoded and disused forums from the Internet's infancy and contemporary low-cost advertising pop-ups (ibid). Indeed, the deliberate selection of *Angelfire* as a host, which was one of the services that helped to popularise this visual style, is further evidence of the self-consciousness of the artist's approach. There is clearly a connection between the carefully chosen hyper-corporate visuals and the vaporwave sounds of INTERNET CLUB. The site is designed to further augment the evocation of the virtual plaza that is a theme of INTERNET CLUB's music. As the audience listens to the 'musical wallpaper' of INTERNET CLUB's vaporwave, they are also immersing themselves in the virtual plaza imagery of their website. The visuals are employed ironically, revelling in the clichés of early Internet aesthetics, but are also used to make a more critical point about the proliferation of capitalism in screen-based virtual spaces.³⁸⁹ The visuals of the site simultaneously enhance the musical experience and amplify the overall message of INTERNET CLUB's vaporwave aesthetic.^{xlvii}

Another interesting example of an interactive audiovisual website is the *DIS*-generated compilation release *Perfect Anything: Reusable Tracks* (2013), envisioned as a collection of stock music for 'missing genres' and featuring many of the artists highlighted throughout this thesis.³⁹⁰ The concept behind the compilation is both the transcendence of genre boundaries and a critique of the role of music in the screen-oriented world of the virtual plaza. This is 'stock music' (comprised of genres that have yet to be named) presented in a collection that visually evokes the virtual plaza.³⁹¹ Rather than releasing a physical album or offering a digital download, *DIS* designed an interactive micro-site that exhibits the tracks in the form of a catalogue, as if to provide options for a consumer to choose from. As with the

³⁸⁸ See Section Five.

³⁸⁹ This evokes the work of PC Music, #HDBOYZ and vaporwave artists.

³⁹⁰ *Perfect Anything* includes tracks by Fatima Al Qadiri, E+E (AKA Elysia Crampton), Gatekeeper, ADR and Ryan Trecartin, alongside Fade To Mind producers Kingdom, Nguzunguzu and MikeQ.

³⁹¹ This style is reminiscent of that which exhibits Ria Ekin's 2013 mix *Modified Branded Landscapes*, highlighted in the appendix.

examples discussed above, this audiovisual presentation allows for interaction on the part of the listener and evokes the screen-dominated nature of Post-Internet culture. The visual background features clichéd stock images including an office chair, a father holding a baby, and the symbol for recycling (see Figure 90). Respectively, these images represent the ‘stock’ music’s practical role as sounds for the workplace, its existence as a selection of ‘newborn’ genres, and the reusable nature of its sounds, while also evoking the kitsch imagery of vaporwave.³⁹² When engaging with *Perfect Anything*, the audience is constantly reminded that they are ‘now using’ – rather than listening to – each track, and the album opens with an instructional speech that alerts the ‘user’ to the functionality of these sounds. The implication is that every sound and image online is a product to be consumed (‘used’) by web browsers.³⁹³ For *DIS*, the ‘artistic’ elements of music are overridden by the constant presence of commerce in the virtual plaza: there is no distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in an environment increasingly overrun with advertising, tracking and marketing strategies.³⁹⁴ Genre labels, according to *DIS*, are mechanisms through which music can be straightforwardly marketed and sold³⁹⁵ (this has arguably always been the case, but is even more so in an era of virtual hyper-capitalism), and these artists’ ‘new genres’ are deemed to be mere ‘stock’ music for corporations and businessmen looking for the next ‘big thing’ to profit from. However, in spite of this scepticism, the compilation remains remarkably innovative in its rejection of genre conventions. It is not merely an ironic pastiche of the virtual plaza. Recognisable popular genres are absent, and instead there is a foregrounding of angular and unusual avant-garde sounds. Glowing synths, digital effects, distorted samples and abstract percussion are located across every track, with the alien nature of these sonics

³⁹² See Foley, September 2013; Dawson and Foster, 1996; Harper, 12 July 2012; Schiller, 1999; and Fuchs, 2012.

³⁹³ A later comparable example of these themes in practice is the 2015 compilation *Starting Gate*, an interactive multimedia website generated by the labels Olde English Spelling Bee and 1080p (Figure 91), which features the Post-Internet sounds of James Ferraro, Giant Claw and others in various digitally animated settings.

³⁹⁴ See Section Two and further discussion of *DIS* in the appendix.

³⁹⁵ See the analysis of Fatima Al Qadiri in the appendix.

making the music seem uncanny and distressingly futuristic. Each piece is wholly different from the last: MikeQ's 'Stabz' is a minimalist combination of sharp synth sounds, hand-claps and house beats; Gatekeeper's 'Streams Of Light' features violently synthetic and claustrophobically vivid sounds; and Fatima Al Qadiri's 'Yelwa' distorts the boundaries between UK grime, vaporwave and hyper-stylised Middle-Eastern aesthetics. There is a clear interest in innovation, alongside an expression of the collapse of generic boundaries emphasised in the previous section. While there is a resigned acceptance (and critique) of the proliferation of commoditisation in the virtual plaza, *DIS* and its followers maintain a determined belief in the continuing power of experimentation through musical expression, audience interactivity and audiovisual production in Post-Internet music culture.

In the final section of this thesis I have drawn together several of the Post-Internet ideas analysed throughout (information noise, the virtual plaza, interactivity, self-curation) and applied them to immersive digital environments such as websites and games. This is partially due to the undoubted innovation of these projects, but most prominently because the contemporary musical milieu is increasingly reliant on screens and, by extension, audiovisual approaches to music making. This is a development that is being embraced extensively in the work of artists including Gatekeeper, Death Grips and P. Morris, and indeed in many of the visual projects analysed in earlier chapters.³⁹⁶ As the attention spans of audiences shorten, generating increased focus on images due to the instantaneous gratification provided by such stimuli, music is forced to explore the possibilities of audiovisual formats in inventive and engaging ways. This is further evidence of a move away from traditional musical exhibition formats such as LP-length physical (or even downloadable) albums, and offers another riposte to accusations of a lack of originality in Post-Internet music culture. The novelty that critics such as Reynolds, Fisher and Morley seek is located not only in the musical output of

³⁹⁶ Key examples of this include FKA twigs, 18+, Lil B, PC Music, #HDBOYZ and Arca/Jesse Kanda.

contemporary musicians, but also in their ability to utilise and embody the visual aspects of the digital environments that they inhabit. In drawing on such recognisable Post-Internet applications and images while considering the impact of information noise and the virtual plaza, these artists provide further examples of attempts to create music that generates an honest representation of Post-Internet cultural experiences. As I emphasise in the conclusion of this thesis, mainstream artists that hope to garner an authentic reputation in the Post-Internet era are increasingly appropriating the techniques examined throughout this thesis. These commercially successful musicians acknowledge the developing necessity to incorporate digital imagery, web-based references and contemporary distribution techniques into their work to successfully appeal to members of the Post-Internet generation.

Conclusion: Mainstream appropriation of Post-Internet themes and aesthetics

The sound that [*Yeezus*] starts with [is] the sonic version of what Internet static would be (West, quoted in McQueen, January 2014)

At a younger age [the internet is] superfluous now. It's completely natural (18+, thesis interview, 2014)

I have never known an art practice that isn't intrinsically linked to life online. [...] As the world around us changes to conform to new technologies, so does the way that it sounds. [It] is a natural extension of being alive now to be inspired by these changes (ADR, thesis interview, 2015)

The notion of a Post-Internet condition has impelled the creative output of many artists and musicians operating in contemporary musical environments. I have sought to identify and analyse various strands of online popular music utilising a new framework that is more applicable than much previous academic investigation of the field. There is a significant division between the relationships to the web held by the 'Internet' and 'Post-Internet' generations, with artists operating in the latter mould evincing musical output that more closely explores issues of fluid Post-Internet identity, fan-curated 'sharity' and transnational communication channels. These themes, I have argued, are signifiers of an emerging interest in music that provides an authentic representation of the nuances of Post-Internet cultural experience. Yet one criticism that may be levelled at this thesis is the marginal nature of the majority of the musicians highlighted. It could be suggested that this is an isolated set of aesthetics and themes, orbiting primarily around *DIS* and largely segregated from meaningful public recognition. As Reynolds would put it, this thesis has seemingly focused primarily on a 'profusion of hyper-referential bands and micro-genres whose stylistic involutions are understood only by hipsterati and bloggerati' (Reynolds, 2011, p. 419). There can be no questioning the fact that these musicians only reach a relatively small audience chiefly comprised of those that maintain an interest in trend-setting online periodicals. They do not frequently break into the charts, and nor do they grace the cover of large-circulation print

magazines.³⁹⁷ It could even be argued that the stylistic and conceptual approaches discussed here are highly incestuous in nature, being made *by DIS-affiliated artists for DIS-affiliated artists*. It could therefore be contended that there is limited worth in analysing musicians whose impact is so minor that it could be deemed irrelevant to culture more widely, especially when I have consistently foregrounded such a far-reaching concept as the Post-Internet condition. In addition to a summary of the ideas outlined in this thesis, the conclusion responds to this problem. It is comprised of analyses of mainstream musicians whose work appropriates and engages with the ideas, aesthetics and even personnel investigated throughout the thesis. Commercially successful stars such as Beyoncé, Björk, Aphex Twin and, most crucially, Kanye West have, in recent years, increasingly demonstrated the Post-Internet themes and aesthetics outlined in this thesis in their output. This has wider ramifications for issues surrounding authenticity, given the mainstream nature of these musicians and the occasionally questionable reasoning behind their appropriations. Here, I analyse the ways in which these stars have brought Post-Internet aesthetics into the mainstream consciousness, while simultaneously considering the motivations behind these decisions. I end the thesis with a brief prediction for the future of Post-Internet ideas and aesthetics, in reference to 18+'s suggestion that digital environments become increasingly 'superfluous' and 'natural' with each passing generation (18+, thesis interview, 2014).

First, though, I provide a brief summation of the arguments outlined throughout. Across the five chapters I have built an academic profile of an online musical milieu that is self-conscious about the increasingly digitised nature of its existence. This has been achieved through the construction of several theoretical frameworks, an investigation of the overarching context of contemporary music cultures, and three chapters of analysis of musicians self-reflexively operating in the Post-Internet mould. As noted in the first chapter,

³⁹⁷ Occasional exceptions to this include avant-garde music publication *The Wire* and fashion/music crossover magazines including *The Fader* and *Dazed*.

the most dominant theoretical approach to popular musical discourses in the digital age has been that of retromanic writers such as Reynolds, Morley and Fisher, whose work has been assimilated almost unquestioningly into both popular culture and academic analysis. While there is much merit in these critics' hypotheses, their overly negative mind-set and condescending dismissal of the musical production of twenty-first century digital cultures display (rather ironically) a nostalgia for a pre-Internet world. Their framework is debatably informed by an 'Internet'-era outlook, whose relationship to the web is one of distancing in contrast with the symbiotic bond of the Post-Internet age outlined by Jurgenson and Post-Internet artists. Without the benefit of the cyborgism that arguably comes from the experience of growing up alongside digital communication technology, it is difficult for these critics to comprehend how anyone could possibly cope with the 'overwhelming' archival systems that exist online. The apparent post-millennial retreat by audiences into retrospective musical styles is claimed to be a signifier that music pre-Internet was more worthwhile, subcultural, original and, particularly problematically, authentic. This is where the notion of the Post-Internet becomes useful as a term that signals a generational and artistic divide. The Post-Internet generation, as I note at the end of the first chapter, is marked neither by fear nor excitement toward this technology or these virtual spaces. These are phenomena that have consistently been present throughout their lives, and that have thus not required integration into their everyday existence. They have *always* been integrated. If this is the case, it is unnecessary for contemporary audiences to seek solace in the nostalgic appropriation of aesthetics that come from a less saturated and debatably more 'authentic' era, which is a keystone of the retromanic argument.³⁹⁸ Rather, as I argue in the second chapter, many members of the Post-Internet audience pursue cultural material that mirrors and explores the digitised existence that they deem commonplace. As such, the concept of authenticity (in the

³⁹⁸ Retromania is arguably a trend that defined the 'early' days of the Internet, when information noise was predominantly experienced by web users that could recall a time prior to its existence.

sense of a contextually-informed aesthetic) remains crucial to contemporary musical milieux. In critiquing many of the claims made in *Retromania* and showing that they display a conceptual incompatibility with contemporary cultural developments, I have suggested that there remains an interest in music that represents, to borrow from Middleton, the ‘truth’ of *Post-Internet* ‘cultural experience’ (Middleton, 1990, p. 127) in the post-millennial era. This contradicts the assertion of Reynolds and others that, because of the overwhelming nature of the web’s archival systems, musicians and audiences alike fail to locate authenticity in contemporary musical production and instead find comfort in listening to and sampling from more ‘valuable’ musical styles, movements and musicians from the past. Authenticity, I argue, is now located in music that actively engages with the digital context that surrounds it, as it thus surveys a condition that is evocative of the lives of its listeners and demonstrates a mentality that is better equipped to comprehend the oversaturated information noise of the virtual plaza. This Post-Internet music, it is again important to stress, is not a new genre with distinctive singular aesthetic properties. It is a group of diverse musicians whose output is marked by comparable themes and interests. The latter half of Chapter Two contextualises these traits by offering a key example of how music practice works in a Post-Internet world: through the fan-led blogging culture that defines contemporary popular music journalism and ‘sharity’. In an era of instantaneous communication, it is straightforward for those that have an organic relationship to these communicative technologies to locate, comprehend and exploit the surrounding media to generate a working musical milieu. This milieu may not seem logical or progressive to those that lack this symbiotic connection to virtual environments (hence criticism and dismissal of it from retromanic theorists), but that does not mean that it is any less authentic to those that do maintain that relationship.

Having introduced and clarified these terms, I then applied them to various musical case studies, selecting musicians whose work is self-conscious in its application of Post-

Internet themes and aesthetics. The latter three chapters took on three different aspects of this trend: the first, an analysis of self-conscious critique and pastiche of contemporary digital images, sounds and social media identities; the second, a study of posthumanism and the embodiment of virtual concepts through explorations of gender, the voice and dissolution of organic identity; and the third, an investigation of malleable channels of communication and interactivity in pan-global compositions and immersive audiovisual environments. A wide range of musicians and artists were addressed, with focus primarily on those with significant ties to *DIS* (owing to its crucial role in Post-Internet art). What has been suggested throughout these analyses is that there are overarching attempts to engage with the virtual cultures that birthed (and now house) these artists. As SOPHIE has noted, these musicians are ‘responding to the fact the Internet exists’ as a focal point of everyday existence (SOPHIE, thesis interview, 2014). These responses take the form of the digital animation of FKA twigs, 18+ and Death Grips; the ‘sensory overload’ (ibid) of PC Music; Ryan Trecartin’s foregrounding of exaggerated multiple identities; Arca and Jesse Kanda’s abstract digitisation of human sensuality; the digital queering of Mykki Blanco; the genre-dissolving compositions of Fade To Mind, *GHE20G0TH1K* and *Janus*; the immersive audiovisual spaces generated by P. Morris and Gatekeeper; the vocal science of Visionist, Laurel Halo and Holly Herndon; Hood By Air’s customisable industrial fashion; the social networking of James Ferraro, Lil B and Hype Williams; and the virtual plaza-preoccupied aesthetics of *DIS Magazine* more widely. These artists acknowledge that their work is inseparable from the virtual spaces that surround it, electing to present their music through a befittingly representative Post-Internet prism. Audiences concurrently engaging with the same issues and environments are able to regard these images, sounds, personas and interactions as authentic illustrations of existence in a Post-Internet culture. Their ‘cultural experience’ is one that involves a constant symbiotic relationship with the Internet and contemporary communication technologies, so it is only

natural that music that embraces this way of life is deemed authentically illustrative of it. Nostalgic and retromanic techniques do not adequately represent the fluidity of information noise or the virtual plaza. They are backward facing, retreating into the past instead of navigating the hyper-digital present that envelops post-millennial youths (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). The artists analysed throughout this thesis do not avoid the themes or imagery of the Post-Internet era. Instead, they celebrate and critique them in their output.

As noted, the increasing popularity of this trend has not gone unnoticed by artists operating within the mainstream. I now turn to an account of several of these musicians, explaining the ways in which they have appropriated many of the themes and aesthetics highlighted here and rendered them suitable for mainstream consumption. This in turn grants these musicians a reputation for Post-Internet authenticity that can be traced back to that afforded to the artists analysed throughout this thesis. The most crucial example is the commercially successful hip-hop vocalist/producer Kanye West, and particularly his album *Yeezus* (Def Jam, 2013). As expected of a musician as widely recognised as West releasing a record on a high profile label in Def Jam, *Yeezus* achieved platinum sales figures and garnered headline coverage in influential media outlets such as *The New York Times* (Caramanica, June 2013) and BBC Radio 1 (Lowe and West, September 2013). The album interestingly displays key thematic and aesthetic similarities to the work of many artists illuminated here. For example, *Yeezus* is self-reflexively informed by the abstract representations of contemporary posthuman identity that motivate Arca (who co-produced the album); the clashing genre styles of Fade To Mind and its affiliates; the neo-industrial evocations of Hood By Air; the antagonistic digital aggression of Death Grips; and the inconsistency of Lil B and James Ferraro. Perhaps the most useful issues to draw on when analysing *Yeezus* are information noise, which seems to be a central conceptual theme on the record, and West's involvement with Shayne Oliver's *DIS*-promoted fashion label Hood By

Air (Dodge, September 2013; see Figure 92). HBA explores the sensory overload that comes from over-exposure to information noise online³⁹⁹ through a focus on bondage wear, synthetic material and metallic components, each of which has been utilised extensively throughout industrial music and art (Reed, 2013). Raymer argues that sonically ‘*Yeezus* most closely resembles [...] the industrial [rock] of the 1990s [produced by] Nine Inch Nails, Ministry, and Marilyn Manson’ (Raymer, June 2013). He suggests that ‘industrial music was [...] responsible for exploring existential alienation through our relationship with technology’, and that West, in aligning himself with the genre both sonically and in terms of his costuming, is attempting to replicate these same ideas in relation to the Post-Internet condition (ibid). The introduction to ‘On Sight’, which opens the album, is referred to by West as being ‘the most uncomfortable sound’ on the record (West, quoted in McQueen, January 2014), and deliberately so. It is the distorted and ‘vengefully ugly’ (Greene, June 2013) sound of excessively processed synthesizers, which is a technique historically associated with the industrial music referenced above (ibid). His reasoning behind this selection is that the sound is, for him, ‘the sonic version of what Internet static would be’ (West, quoted in McQueen, January 2014). *Yeezus* therefore begins by forcibly announcing its association with web culture and information noise. This ‘Internet static’ is evocative of modem dial-up sounds from pre-broadband 1990s/early-2000s Web 1.0; a corrosive and inconsistent set of electronic scrapes, beeps and shudders. The album starts by symbolically connecting to the online world: a futuristic but ugly sonic environment. This resonates with the way that West perceives the Internet: as a problematic and flawed symbol of idealised notions of the future prophesied in the late-twentieth century (Lowe and West, 2013).

The industrial sound of *Yeezus* is redolent of information noise in two key ways: texturally and compositionally. I begin by analysing the textural experiments throughout the

³⁹⁹ See Section Two and Section Seven.

album. Many of the industrial sounds are reminiscent of Death Grips, whose aggressive ‘pixelated’ style (Calvert, 26 April 2012) symbolises splintering morality and identities online.⁴⁰⁰ Indeed, the group’s comment that ‘everything is static, just eating away at the individual’ echoes West’s sentiments about the introduction to *Yeezus* (Flatlander, in Calvert, 14 July 2011). West renders the distorted noise-hop of Death Grips suitable for mainstream consumption by reducing the intensity and introducing melody through the employment of refrains by ‘conventional’ vocalists such as Frank Ocean and Justin Vernon, but he remains indebted to their conceptual and aesthetic approach. While the track ‘I Am A God’ is influenced by popular styles such as house, its structure and production have a provocatively disruptive and destabilising effect. As Raymer explains, the song ‘opens with a sample of the dancehall singer Capleton that glitches out at the end like a CD skipping or (more likely these days) a corrupted MP3 downloaded off the Internet’ (Raymer, June 2013). This audibly foregrounds the presence of digital communication technology and refuses to conceal the production processes involved in the record. As the track progresses, its form becomes increasingly pixelated,⁴⁰¹ with the central static bass synth folding in on itself and losing its rhythmic propulsion until the track stops abruptly. The sudden silence is pierced by an anguished scream from West: a discordant, jarring and confrontational sound. Once the screaming halts the track returns to something resembling its original form, but it is even more structurally unsound, with the synthesizers encased in further distortion and static. West’s scream is a moment of pained humanity among the unmelodic and hyper-digital technology that provides the song’s arrangement. This attempt to symbolise the collapsing distinctions between humanity and the digital in a Post-Internet world is evocative of the work of Holly Herndon and Laurel Halo.⁴⁰² On ‘Hold My Liquor’, guest singer Justin

⁴⁰⁰ See Section Eight.

⁴⁰¹ This further evokes the image of a corrupted digital file, which is emphasised in the ‘blank CD’ style artwork that accompanies the release (shown in Figure 93).

⁴⁰² See Section Eight.

Vernon's vocals are heavily autotuned until they become unrecognisable. His vocal identity has been metaphorically fused to digital technologies to the extent that he sounds cyborgian. The exaggerated use of autotune on the album renders the vocal timbre of practically every guest singer/rapper uncannily posthuman.⁴⁰³ 'I'm In It'⁴⁰⁴ pushes the cyborgian theme further still, with its central musical motif combining mechanised trap beats and industrialised textures with the repetitive sample of a woman's sexualised moans. Much like in the work of 18+, sex itself becomes inseparable from digital spaces: the Post-Internet generation's organic sensual urges are corrupted and morphed by the co-dependence of real and virtual environments.

The structural approach of *Yeezus* is also linked to the theme of information noise. It is comprised of many disparate parts stitched together without consideration for compositional or generic consistency. Harper describes this technique in relation to Oneohtrix Point Never's⁴⁰⁵ 2013 album *R Plus Seven* as 'modular [with] wildly different bits and pieces – sometimes starkly monophonic – bolted together' (Harper, 18 October 2013). This modularity involves the use of multiple 'different musical images but dispensed one at a time, laid out neatly in a row' (ibid). It is a form of 'sequential minimalism', taking single 'monophonic' ideas and exhibiting them in a way that emphasises their distinction from one another (ibid), and has similarities to the avant-garde clashes of the collage-esque productions analysed in Section Nine.⁴⁰⁶ While Harper refers to OPN's *R Plus Seven* as 'a kind of storytelling' (ibid) in which the separate components are revealed to the listener gradually, *Yeezus* feels far less stable, placing emphasis on the disruptive and jarring nature of these sonic juxtapositions in a comparable way to Arca, Lotic or Gobby. It is representative of the

⁴⁰³ Although West introduced this stylistic trope on his previous two albums *808s & Heartbreak* (2008) and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), his vocal science is taken to new extremes throughout the entirety of *Yeezus*.

⁴⁰⁴ 'I'm In It' was co-produced by Evian Christ, a Post-Internet associate of Arca, Kelela, Hood By Air and Fade To Mind.

⁴⁰⁵ See the appendix.

⁴⁰⁶ See Section Nine.

‘attention-deficit disorder’ brought about by the abundance of information noise. A multiplicity of genres, samples, influences, voices, sounds and ideas are presented in a jagged and inconsistent procession, with the listener refused the comfort of enjoying one specific element for any extended length of time. During ‘On Sight’, for instance, the above-mentioned buzzing ‘static’ of malfunctioning synthesizers abruptly halts mid-loop, to be replaced dramatically by a children’s choir singing an excerpt of the hymn ‘He’ll Give Us What We Really Need’, before the synths return just as unexpectedly. Similarly, although ‘I Am A God’, ‘Bound 2’ and ‘New Slaves’ include moments of melody, they are introduced or interrupted without forewarning, often midway through a line (or even a word, as with Charlie Wilson’s guest refrain on ‘Bound 2’). Listeners are unable to fully absorb these moments of melodic respite, and are instead repeatedly and suddenly introduced to new and increasingly ugly sonic juxtapositions. Such a modulated, distorted and glitch-filled sonic palette, presented in a disruptive and jarring structure, would not have been feasible in mainstream musical production but for the influence of previously examined experiments in Post-Internet music making.

Lou Reed suggests that ‘Kanye West is a child of social networking’ (Reed, July 2013), which is illustrated in the recognition of information noise’s relationship to Post-Internet experience located in *Yeezus*’ lyrical themes. West’s lyrics are angry and confrontational but bereft of clarity, meaning that the album is rife with contradictions and unstable perspectives. As such, there are comparisons that can be made with the inconsistent social media presences of Lil B, James Ferraro and Hype Williams. According to the album’s co-producer Rick Rubin, some of the lyrics on *Yeezus* were written ‘on the spot’, ‘three days before [they] had to turn in the record’ (Rubin, quoted in Romano, June 2013). This explains the contradictions and lack of focus in certain tracks, but fails to account for the album’s more general irregularities. It seems that this stream-of-conscious writing style was partially a

deliberate ploy on West's part to maintain an atmosphere that matches the disruptive effects of the music. The lyrical technique mirrors the culture of information noise, emphasising online communication systems' lack of censorship and multiplicity of ideas and perspectives. Perhaps the most succinct description of this linguistic stylisation is the '#nofilter' analogy discussed in relation to Lil B in Section Six (Cliff, December 2013). The term '#nofilter' can be applied to the uncensored nature of West's approach. His lyrics have no filter, and he often seems to be rapping on a whim without consideration for hypocrisy, offensiveness or uniformity. The most prominent example of this is found on the album's centrepiece 'Blood On The Leaves'. The track is built on a looped and re-pitched sample of Nina Simone's 'Strange Fruit', one of the most recognisable songs of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. Yet West's lyrics clash with those sampled beneath them. He complains about trivial issues such as alimony and MDMA, maintaining a misogynistic aura throughout, while Simone's sample powerfully condemns the lynching and hanging of African-Americans. West even compares being forced to sit in a certain section of a basketball stadium (separate from the female subject of the track) to the segregation of Apartheid, which undoubtedly indicates a failure to prioritise political and personal issues. His fluctuating message thus becomes increasingly estranged from the clarity of Simone's critique. These contradictory, narcissistic, trivial and puerile lyrics serve to undermine Simone's (and consequently West's) attack on institutionalised racism.^{xlviii} However, as I have noted, West is personifying the over-abundance of perspectives, ideologies and identities that threaten to overwhelm the Post-Internet generation. He may be uncomfortably inconsistent in his message, but many social networkers have also become so due to the proliferation of information noise.⁴⁰⁷

As explained in Section Six, #nofilter accompanies unedited images on social media. West is an avid *Twitter* user and his own account is just as unfiltered as that of Lil B, with his

⁴⁰⁷ This is not, of course, a strong enough excuse for many of his more indefensible lyrical themes.

tweets moving rapidly from rants, to self-promotion, to jokes, to highly-personal photographs of his family, to abstract messages evocative of those produced by James Ferraro. *Yeezus* feels like an extension of this style of social networking. Serious concepts and ideas clash constantly with infantile humour. Sincerity and irony jostle for dominance on the record. The resultant message is one of incoherence, aimlessness and hypocrisy. *Yeezus* often seems to be a random stream of memes and popular cultural references.⁴⁰⁸ Many of these references jar uncomfortably with the primary message of each track, and West appears incapable of separating material interests from wider contextual concerns. This is an issue that resonates with previous allusions to the omniscience of the virtual plaza in this thesis. This lyrical approach, combined with the previously discussed modular genre and sample clashes and dehumanised, unrecognisable guest vocalists, renders it impossible to grasp a singular message on the album. The only consistency throughout *Yeezus* is its impenetrable incomprehensibility. This is all reminiscent of the information noise of Post-Internet culture. West's stream-of-consciousness is evocative of the information flow of a *Facebook* timeline, a *Twitter* newsfeed or a *Tumblr* wall. Serious global issues and news stories share equal space on these feeds with trivial personal issues, selfies, jokes, memes and multiple contrasting perspectives, ideas and cultural references. This exemplifies the decontextualisation brought about by the Internet and the complications that such sensory overload creates for the mind-set of the Post-Internet generation. If a web user is continually bombarded with phenomena from multiple different contexts, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to separate trivial issues from critical ones.⁴⁰⁹ The anger that permeates the confusion of *Yeezus* is aimed at

⁴⁰⁸ See, for example, decontextualised allusions to Jay-Z and Beyoncé on 'Blood On The Leaves', Zack Snyder's *300* (2006) and Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005) on 'Black Skinhead', iPhone and Blackberry devices on 'I'm In It', and references to various fashion designers, wealthy businessmen and sports cars throughout.

⁴⁰⁹ See Section Six, particularly in relation to James Ferraro and Hype Williams, as well as Section Two's overview of the effects of information overload.

West's own inability to form a coherent and assured argument, and mirrors the fact that the Post-Internet condition has forced other constant social networkers into the same situation.

While *Yeezus* is undoubtedly the most aggressive and experimental instance of a mainstream artist appropriating Post-Internet themes and aesthetics, there are other examples across mainstream popular music. Two high-profile albums that demonstrate the audiovisual approach outlined in Section Ten are Beyoncé's 2013 self-titled digital release (Columbia Records) and Björk's 2011 app-album *Biophilia* (One Little Island Records). The multi-platinum singer Beyoncé uploaded *Beyoncé* to *iTunes* without pre-publicity on December 13 2013. This is not overly uncommon in hip-hop and R&B in particular, given the increasing need to attract the dwindling attention of audiences through innovative release strategies, and could be regarded as little more than a method of building hype in an era of market hyper-saturation.⁴¹⁰ However, what is interesting about the record is its visual presentation. The album, which ultimately sold even more copies than *Yeezus*, features fourteen songs and seventeen videos (each track has its own video, and there are several bonus clips included in the *iTunes* package, screenshots from which are shown in Figure 94). The paid download of the album includes each of these videos. In the same way that West's release draws on the lack of distinction that is a result of information noise, Beyoncé has connected her project visually to the Post-Internet generation's daily consumption of *YouTube*, *Periscope*, *Vine*, *Instagram* and other image/video-based apps and sites. As noted throughout Section Ten, images and screens increasingly dominate twenty-first century public consciousness, with sounds gradually retreating into the background. Beyoncé has embraced these developments to focus audience attention on the entirety of her album rather than just its promotional singles. Her album is an audiovisual release: by making the videos a key part of the *iTunes* download, rather than clips that must be viewed elsewhere, the tracks effectively become

⁴¹⁰ Comparable examples of unannounced major label releases include Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* on Interscope Records and Drake's *If You're Reading This It's Too Late* on Young Money Entertainment (both 2015).

inseparable from their visual accompaniments. This is a high-budget approach to the methodologies and themes employed by P. Morris, Gatekeeper and Death Grips. It allows (arguably even forces) audiences to invest substantial focus in the release to experience it fully. This is not an album that fans simply put on in the background, as the videos are a critical aspect of its enjoyment and artistic endeavour. Björk's *Biophilia* is similarly inspired by apps and their importance to contemporary audiences. *Biophilia* was released as a set of smartphone/tablet applications that enable users to explore the album both sonically and visually (see Figures 95-98). This transforms the release into an interactive and immersive musical game, much like those constructed by Gatekeeper and P. Morris. It is, crucially, one that is ultimately entirely portable. As Jurgenson stresses, the Internet is not something that simply exists on a computer and disappears once its users re-enter the 'real world' (Jurgenson, 2012; 2014). Its impact is everywhere, as noted by James Ferraro: 'people are essentially wearing the Internet, eating it, hearing it, talking about it all the time' (Gibb, December 2011). Björk is incorporating this into the presentation of her music. These portable apps (and by extension the tracks they house) are of the virtual realm, but they are experienced as part of everyday life. While listeners are engaging with her digital productions, they can simultaneously be getting on with their 'real' lives. Björk

wanted to enrich the album technologically. The plan: each track would also have an individual app for iPad and iPhone. [...] The user would interact with the song in a way that would teach them about its musicological theme – by changing tempo, say, or rearranging the notes. Sometimes these functions would run so deep as to turn an app into a thorough-going instrument. Björk was describing a new musical format: the app-album (Burton, July 2011)

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this release, and what arguably makes it even more innovative than *Beyoncé*, is that it is not just a long-form music video. It is immersive in the same way as *Exo*, *Debut* and *Beloved*. The audience's attention is not just held by the images presented to them; it is maintained through the ability (even necessity) to 'interact with the song[s]' to fully experience the project as a whole (ibid). It is telling that the quote from

Burton utilises the term ‘user’ instead of ‘listener’ or even ‘audience’ (a term that is similarly exploited by *DIS* on their *Perfect Anything* website⁴¹¹). This is an ‘app-album’ that is ‘used’; it places control in the hands of the audience and thus encourages them to maintain a degree of focus that may have dwindled were they not afforded the same investment/input that *Biophilia* demands/allows.⁴¹² While Björk⁴¹³ and Beyoncé’s use of app technology and music videos may to some extent have been promotional devices designed to generate audience interest (an inevitable accusation aimed at artists on major labels), both have been enabled – and motivated – by the fact that audiovisual spaces are now an everyday part of popular music culture.⁴¹⁴

In a further instance of a commercially successful artist drawing on Post-Internet themes, Aphex Twin (AKA Richard D. James, who garnered a reputation in the 1990s for playing with his identity in the media and exploiting new technologies in his sonic and visual work [Reynolds, June 2010]) re-emerged in 2014 after a decade of reclusiveness and began utilising comparable methods of hyper-critical self-promotion to those of James Ferraro, Lil B and Hype Williams.⁴¹⁵ The marketing campaign for his album *Syro* (2014) is the most vivid example of this. Aphex Twin

⁴¹¹ See Section Ten.

⁴¹² It is interesting that the organic subject matter of the album (it is primarily about natural sciences) contrasts with the hyper-digital imagery and environments that present it. This is a reference to a symbiotic relationship between the virtual and the organic: a key aspect of Post-Internet identity politics as noted throughout this thesis.

⁴¹³ Björk has explored these themes further in the 2015 video for ‘Stonemilker’ (Figure 99), which is a panoramic 360° virtual reality environment (created by Andrew Thomas Huang, Vrse.works and Digital Domain) that is evocative of P. Morris’ *Debut*. When asked about the inspiration for the video, Björk explained that virtual reality ‘is good at intimacy, even more intimate than reality’, a stance that connects her to the work of musicians analysed in Chapter Four (quoted in *Dazed*, June 2015).

⁴¹⁴ This methodology is becoming increasingly common, and has been appropriated by star figures including singers Bruno Mars (as in the 2012 OKFocus-designed interactive video ‘Treasure Dance’ [Figure 100], which is comprised of randomly-selected fan-generated *Instagram* images/videos connected by the hashtag #treasuredance) and Miley Cyrus (whose stream-of-conscious, unfiltered and regularly-updated *Instagram* account is a Lil B-esque collage of selfies, Photoshopped images and PC Music-style Day-Glo aesthetics [Figure 101]). Their approaches evoke the work of artists throughout this thesis, and are further examples of Post-Internet themes and ideas entering the mainstream consciousness. The fact that they were both also commercially successful promotion strategies emphasises their popularity with online audiences.

⁴¹⁵ See Section Six.

tweeted a link that was accessible only through *Tor*, a browser designed for accessing the deep web (the often shady reaches of the Internet not indexed by standard search engines). The link took those using *Tor* to a page that contained an Aphex Twin image along with information regarding the forthcoming album's title and track-list. Although the link can be accessed via a normal browser, [...] details of the tracks and album title are not available on it (Jonze, August 2014)

This provocative approach is fairly typical of James' 1990s self-promotional techniques, but it is telling that in this contemporary example he has chosen to offer a form of 'exclusivity' to those with an in-depth knowledge of the deep web and its workings (see Figure 102). The 'deep web' is a heavily encrypted series of websites whose success is dependent on the anonymity afforded by *Tor*, a browser that uses proxy servers to hide IP addresses and thus prevent sites/users from showing up on search engines (Greenberg, November 2014). It is highly exclusive and is host to the controversial 'dark web', which has raised mainstream media alarm for its apparent ability to anonymise child pornography rings, arms/drug dealers, hackers-for-hire, money laundering organisations and contract killers (*Daily Mail* Reporter, October 2013). It could be suggested that Aphex Twin is aligning himself with these hidden subcultural spaces⁴¹⁶ or that he is deliberately provoking the concerned media. I would argue that he is maintaining a self-conscious interest in the balance between anonymity and total transparency that is a key element of Post-Internet identity. As explained throughout Section Six, Post-Internet audiences are simultaneously intrigued by reclusiveness and determined to know everything instantaneously. Aphex Twin has utilised 'unconfirmed' pseudonyms (The Tuss, for instance), incorporating minute clues regarding the identity of the figure behind these personas into their output to entice his fans, and has created anonymous *SoundCloud* accounts (most prominently user18081971) to distribute demos/outtakes from across his career. This (anti-)marketing strategy sees Richard D. James expressing the same ideas as those of James Ferraro, Lil B and Hype Williams, playing with hype, mystification and

⁴¹⁶ This is a methodology that is reminiscent of the antagonistic activism of Death Grips, who named their self-leaked 2012 album *NO LOVE DEEP WEB* after the phenomenon.

exaggerated personas to excite and infuriate his online fans in equal measure.⁴¹⁷ Aphex Twin is, of course, utilising these methods in a more visible public forum, given his comparatively substantial fame.^{xlix}

Kanye West, Aphex Twin, Beyoncé and Björk use the same Post-Internet themes, aesthetics and approaches to interactivity that permeate the work of musicians in this thesis. They utilise social media, avatars, memes, visuals, Post-Internet identity politics and information noise aesthetics evinced by Post-Internet artists. These musicians thus draw on art that is effective at attaining both popularity and a reputation for authenticity within a culture that has seen a widespread shortening of attention spans. As noted throughout this thesis, Post-Internet artists and musicians are authenticated because they explore and engage with the digital culture that surrounds them. Mainstream artists are looking to be authenticated in the same way to appeal to the large audiences online and retain their (constantly wavering) focus and interest for an extended length of time. Yet authenticity is not something that is afforded to every attempt to examine Post-Internet culture and contemporary technology. It must be earned through direct and transparent attempts to genuinely embody and partake of the same environments that Post-Internet audiences experience every day. The musicians in this thesis ‘live’ the Post-Internet condition. They are connected to *DIS* and helped to establish many of its themes and aesthetics. They are not seen to be drawing on these concepts and images with the aim of financial gain.⁴¹⁸ Rather, the experimental nature of their themes and aesthetics gains them a reputation for creating music that is closely indebted to the experiences of Post-Internet culture and the ‘sharity’-driven milieu of blogging and instantaneous communication. Any mainstream artist seeking to be

⁴¹⁷ Boards Of Canada’s ‘bizarre online and offline global treasure hunt’ marketing campaign for 2013 album *Tomorrow’s Harvest* is another example of this approach (Aitken, January 2015), as is the wig-donning public anonymity of electro-pop vocalist, Kanye West collaborator and self-dubbed human ‘art project’ Sia (Wiig, 2015; Cliff, July 2014) (Figure 103).

⁴¹⁸ It must be stated, however, that many of these musicians do achieve some small degree of commercial success.

authenticated by generating music that is aimed at Post-Internet audiences must also be seen to acknowledge those subcultural artists that initially helped to develop Post-Internet aesthetics. There is a fine line between being authenticated by drawing on these themes and being accused of copying them for financial gain. The reason why Kanye West, Aphex Twin and Björk have managed to attain authenticity in this field is that they have matched their appropriation of Post-Internet aesthetics with their employment of producers and themes associated with the style. As suggested, Aphex Twin has offered exclusive news and material to his web-based fans by utilising Internet-specific distribution and communication networks, thus aligning himself with his digital audience. This deliberate engagement with, and understanding of, online subcultures contrasts with more commonly exploited techniques of using the web for self-promotion and corporate marketing. The difference in reception between Aphex Twin's 2001 album *drukQs* and his release of over 100 tracks on *SoundCloud* fourteen years later is noteworthy here. James was criticised for a lack of coherence on *drukQs*, with the album's 'bloatedness' and inconsistent sound drawing significant journalistic vitriol.⁴¹⁹ In contrast, his user18081971 *SoundCloud* account⁴²⁰ has been praised for the vast quantities of eclectic music it contains (Aitken, January 2015). This disparity is partially due to the gradual decrease in prominence of the album format, of course, as well as the fact that the *SoundCloud* releases are regarded as unlinked demos from different periods and are thus not recognised as being a 'cohesive' piece of work in the same way as an LP. Yet it is also related to the Post-Internet nature of the *SoundCloud* uploads. The user18081971 account is simultaneously a celebration of the distribution channels of the web (the tracks are free and are not designed to be listened to in any specific order, revelling in their lack of structural/temporal connection); an echo of the over-abundance of cultural material available to Post-Internet audiences (almost nine hours' worth of music was

⁴¹⁹ See Battaglia, 2001; Siebelt, 2002; and Seymour III, 2001.

⁴²⁰ It is worth noting that this username has changed without warning several times. 'user18081971' is only the most recent of these multiple pseudonyms.

uploaded in just a few days); and a further attempt to play with identity politics and social media (through the use of an anonymous pseudonymic username). In essence, these uploads are more redolent of the unfiltered and hyper-prolific release styles of Gobby and Lil B than of traditional methods of distribution. They celebrate their own inconsistency, diversity and overwhelming quantity.⁴²¹

West amplified his Post-Internet connections by working with producer Evian Christ on *Yeezus*.⁴²² Evian Christ is a Post-Internet curatorial figure, organising regular London club nights alongside artists from labels such as Fade To Mind and PC Music. By aligning himself with such a dominant figure in the scene, West immediately rendered his work ‘authentic’ to the fan-bases of Evian Christ and his peers and was simultaneously able to ‘make a futuristic sounding record’ (Evian Christ, thesis interview, 2015). Although West undoubtedly holds more authority within the mainstream popular music industry (in terms of finance, contacts and market share), it is ironically he that needed the far less recognisable figure of Evian Christ (not vice-versa) to render his image authentic to Post-Internet experiences and thus enhance his reputation as an artist with an inherent understanding of, and connection to, the Post-Internet musical milieu.⁴²³ Both West and Björk have employed digital queer producer Arca extensively (he is a co-producer on *Yeezus* and Björk’s 2015 album *Vulnicura*⁴²⁴), who is arguably an even more influential figure within Post-Internet art circles than Evian Christ. He collaborates extensively with *DIS*, Hood By Air, *GHE20GOTH1K*, FKA twigs, Jesse

⁴²¹ For more on this ‘flippant’ approach to musical distribution, see Lauren Martin’s 2012 piece about the unorthodox release strategies of Hype Williams and Actress, ‘Form, Freedom and how Current Electronic Music is reshaping the LP’ (also referenced in Section Six).

⁴²² Evian Christ has connections to Jam City, Total Freedom, Hood By Air, Kelela and many others analysed in this thesis.

⁴²³ West sought to amplify his relationship to independent music cultures yet further on 3 March 2015 by performing a surprise show at the low-capacity venue Koko in London, alongside local grime artists including Skepta, Novelist, JME and Meridian Dan.

⁴²⁴ Björk has taken comparable measures to connect with Post-Internet audiences personally in her appearances at showcases and performances by PC Music and Mykki Blanco, while allowing Death Grips to sample her vocals extensively on 2014’s *Niggas On The Moon* (Michaels, October 2014). She thanks Total Freedom, Le1f, Lotic, Kelela, Arca and Mykki Blanco for their influence on her work in the liner notes of 2015’s *Vulnicura* (Figure 104) and generated a 2015 mix alongside Tri-Angle Records for *Rinse.fm* featuring music by many key Post-Internet artists.

Kanda, Kelela and many others, and has been the frequent subject of praise from key media outlets such as *Pitchfork* and *Dazed*. His music is highly abstract in its presentation of Post-Internet identity, and has been central to the development of the aesthetic as a whole.⁴²⁵ Yet his experimental and confrontational sonic style has not prevented these mainstream artists from collaborating with him. They acknowledge, and seek to draw on, the authority that he holds within Post-Internet music cultures. Brown argues that ‘a star like Kanye can approach a new album with nothing more than a vague desire to sound fresh, and simply delegate the rest’ to musicians at the vanguard of Post-Internet music to grant himself a certain degree of authenticity with contemporary audiences (Brown, November 2014, p. 63). This curatorial ‘hired gun assembly line method functions with impressive efficiency’, as the ‘freelance teamwork’ of the carefully selected Post-Internet producers renders the construction of a mainstream take on Post-Internet aesthetics straightforward (ibid). Authenticity is therefore drawn not only from appropriating the aesthetics outlined in this thesis, but also from actively engaging with the subculture that developed them. Audiences seek genuine attempts to connect with the Internet’s independent artists before mainstream appropriations of their themes, sounds and images are ‘accepted’ as authentic. FKA twigs⁴²⁶ has been the most commercially successful of the *DIS*-related Post-Internet artists considered in this thesis, gaining publicity in mainstream media outlets and receiving a ‘Best Album’ nomination at the 2014 Mercury Award ceremony. Her on-going connections to the Post-Internet subculture that she emerged from (aesthetically, thematically and collaboratively, as seen in her work with Arca and Jesse Kanda) have meant that she has succeeded in avoiding accusations of selling-out. Those links remain visible to her initial audience, to the extent that she has even

⁴²⁵ See Section Seven.

⁴²⁶ See Section Eight.

been able to advertise corporate products⁴²⁷ without alienating or angering her original fans and collaborators.⁴²⁸ 1

Many musicians have elicited a backlash from Post-Internet audiences, however, due to a perceived lack of connect between themselves and the styles that they are referencing and appropriating. ADR, as quoted previously, believes that music in this mould is seen to be inauthentic if its creator shows no interest in being ‘linked to a network [or] expanded into [the] on-going streams’ that make up the Post-Internet musical milieu (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). Venus X, founder of *GHE20G0TH1K* and a key figure in Post-Internet music, asserts that ‘appropriation is great when you’re engaging with the people you appropriate from’, but is critical of mainstream musicians that she claims ‘don’t want engagement; they want to take your ideas and pretend that they created them’ (quoted in Barron, May 2015). The most recognisable example of a Post-Internet backlash against this lack of ‘engagement’ is that of R&B star Rihanna. Her appropriation of ‘#seapunk’ imagery (Figure 106) for the 2012 live performance of the song ‘Diamonds’ on *Saturday Night Live*,⁴²⁹ as well as tagged 2013/2014 references to ‘#ghetto #goth’ (clearly reminiscent of *GHE20G0TH1K*) on her *Instagram* photographs (Figure 108), were undoubtedly commercially successful stylistic choices. However, they did not endear her to the subcultures that she was drawing on. She was deemed to be ‘poaching’ #seapunk’s kitschy digi-oceanic aesthetics by its originators JeromeLOL, Le1f, DJ Lil Internet and their fans (Martins, November 2012), leading to a tirade of anger on social media. Similarly, Venus X of *GHE20G0TH1K* publicly chastised Rihanna for ‘stealing’ her image (see Figure 109) without promoting the party that invented

⁴²⁷ The most prominent example of this is the short film/advert that she produced for *Google Glass* in 2014, ‘#throughglass’ (see Figure 105).

⁴²⁸ For an in-depth investigation of the ways in which mainstream corporations – *Red Bull* in particular, a company that has worked with many of the musicians analysed in this thesis – have succeeded in maintaining an authentic relationship with online music subcultures without compromising on their commoditisation, see Friedlander, November 2014; Muller, February 2015; and Walmsley, February 2015.

⁴²⁹ #seapunk is a Post-Internet trend (a predecessor of vaporwave) with which digital queer rapper Le1f, discussed in the appendix, is associated (see Figure 107).

it, stating that ‘I work so hard for some dumb industry sex slave bitch to come collect all the coins and credit for my brand’ (Venus X, quoted in Tsjeng, May 2014). By electing not to acknowledge the Post-Internet musicians and audiences that first generated these aesthetics (in contrast with, for example, Björk and West who simultaneously promoted producers from the cultures that they were borrowing from), Rihanna has attracted the same accusations of inauthenticity that have long been a dividing issue in debates about the mainstream and independence.⁴³⁰ While this may not be an issue commercially (she effectively ignored the criticism and it had little impact on her wider fan-base) it has tarnished her reputation in Post-Internet music cultures in a way that West’s appropriation of its themes has not.^{li} The trends in Post-Internet music toward explorations of contemporary identity and

culture culture co-opting and readjusting [...] stand in sharp contrast [to] Rihanna scooping up some #seapunk signifiers and sending them straight to *Saturday Night Live*, skipping every rung of the underground-to-mainstream ladder and pillaging an entire *Tumblr* community. [Post-Internet artists’] decision to feed message board curiosities in the form of [digital music] back to the collators seems like a far more ethical and implicative approach [that] also pays lip service to the take-and-give spirit that’s inherent to [the online musical milieu] (Soderberg, October 2013)

This emphasises the fact that simply appropriating Post-Internet themes, ideas and methods is frequently not enough to establish an authentic reputation with online audiences. Mainstream artists must fully illustrate connections to digital subcultures and Post-Internet themes to avoid accusations of ‘poaching’ or ‘selling-out’ when borrowing from Post-Internet music fans and musicians.^{lii} Although this does not always guarantee acceptance,⁴³¹ it is generally more successful than the techniques of those artists that appropriate without offering credit.

To conclude, this thesis has demonstrated the significance that issues of authenticity, in the sense of presenting an honest image of contextualised cultural experience, retain within contemporary musical milieux. It has addressed the ways in which previous academic

⁴³⁰ See Chapter Two, as well as Webb, 2007; and Harper, September 2014.

⁴³¹ See, for instance, singer Lady Gaga’s attempt to launch her 2013 album *ARTPOP* at Berlin’s internationally renowned digital queer nightclub Berghain, which was met with anger from regular attendees who believed that the ‘vomit-inducing narcissist of the fake celebrity world’ was exploiting their ‘sacred [...] scene’ (Wilder, 2013).

analysis of digital popular music has elided this fact, and critiqued the prevalent and overly negative retromanic approaches to the subject. In contrast, I developed a fresh and contextually informed perspective, drawing on the wider cultural and representational issues surrounding Post-Internet theory to address contemporary musical milieux more generally, before studying various independent artists operating in online environments. I have concluded by suggesting that these themes are gradually penetrating the mainstream due to their on-going appropriation by highly visible stars. I have moved away from the ‘Internet’ approach of much academic discourse surrounding online music cultures, which has been constricted by a descriptive view of post-millennial technological developments that infers that they are still ‘new’ and revolutionising the music industry as a whole. Post-Internet audiences have an intimate relationship to this technology moulded by its normalised everyday presence throughout their whole lives, and contemporary musicians are thus exploiting it in increasingly exciting and contextually pertinent ways. A fuller and wider employment of the framework offered in this thesis (for instance, in the field of popular music studies) would allow for a thorough consideration of the Post-Internet musical milieu while providing an effective riposte to the dominance of negative retromanic suggestions that contemporary music culture is devoid of innovation, authenticity and notable subcultures.

There is one further issue that is worthy of note. Now that these aesthetics and themes are less marginalised and are increasingly recognised within mainstream culture, it would be problematic to suggest that they could continue in the same subversive and underground vein that they have to date. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, these issues are very much of the ‘now’. The first half of the 2010s may have been post-*Retromania* and the ‘Internet’ generation, but in this period the web was undoubtedly still a phenomenon in its relative infancy in terms of artistic exploration. The Post-Internet era is a hinterland between the shock-of-the-new that marked the Internet’s early years and its inevitable progression toward

an ordinary everyday part of the western cultural landscape. Post-Internet theory asserts that those that have grown up alongside virtual spaces and digital technologies share a symbiotic relationship with them. However, in reality the reason Post-Internet artists, musicians and audiences are so self-consciously engaged with these phenomena is that there remains novelty in the potential to experiment with online media such as apps, social networks, emojis and web design. These musicians' relationships with the Internet may be synergetic, but those relationships have in themselves provided the impetus to generate work that knowingly explores the web and identity. With mainstream acceptance and increasing digital-enculturation, the themes, ideas and aesthetics analysed in this thesis will likely become even more commonplace. The 2010s have been a fruitful period for musical experiments in sound, image, form, representation, identity and self-promotion. However, the escalating power and social acceptance of corporate presence online increasingly results in these innovations becoming marketing devices that are simplified and exploited by businesses until they are completely assimilated into everyday culture. As such, it is difficult to predict whether the themes and aesthetics of *DIS* and its associates will continue to dominate online music (and subsequently infiltrate the mainstream even more explicitly) or simply cease to be a worthwhile source of artistic exploration. What is clear, however, and what has been the focus of this thesis, is that throughout the Post-Internet era to date (the first half of the 2010s: post-*Retromania* and pre-mainstream assimilation) many musicians have attained a reputation for authenticity by self-reflexively examining their own intimacy with digital spaces, embodying an organic understanding of – and connection to – the experiences of Post-Internet culture in their output. These musicians 'interrogate and disrupt patriarchal [and] consumerist thinking' online, revelling in the potential for musical subversion and posthuman queering enabled by digital technology and virtual spaces (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). The musicians analysed here experiment with the Internet sonically,

visually and representationally, probing the boundaries of contemporary technology and investigating its relationship to Post-Internet art, identity, culture and society more widely.

PICTURES

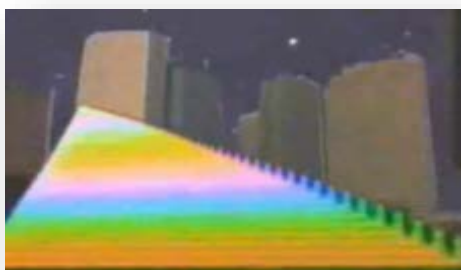


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

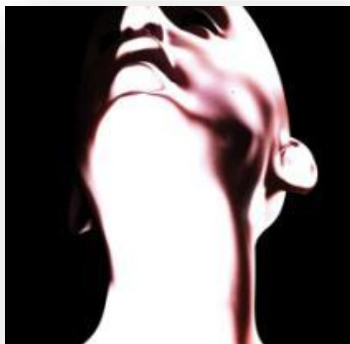


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31

kane west

Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 35



Figure 34



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 39

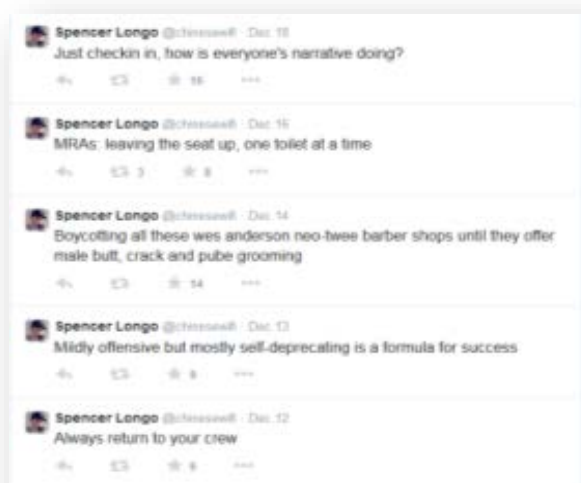


Figure 38



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 62



Figure 43



Figure 54



Figure 45



Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 38



Figure 49



Figure 50



Figure 51



Figure 52



Figure 53

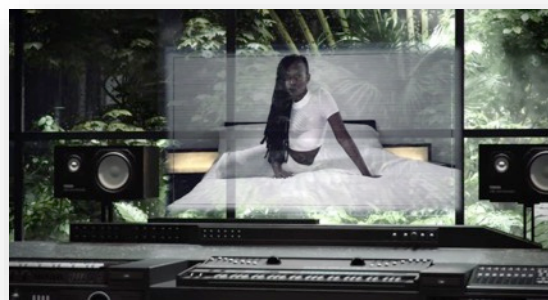


Figure 54



Figure 55



Figure 56



Figure 57



Figure 58



Figure 59

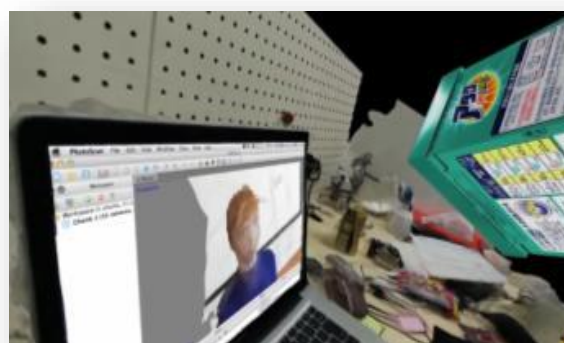


Figure 60



Figure 61



Figure 62



Figure 63



Figure 64



Figure 65



Figure 66



Figure 67

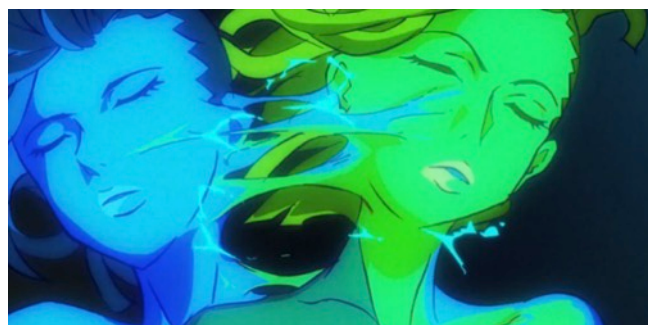


Figure 68



Figure 69



Figure 70



Figure 71



Figure 72



Figure 73



Figure 74



Figure 75



Figure 76



Figure 77



Figure 78



Figure 79



Figure 80



Figure 81



Figure 92



Figure 73

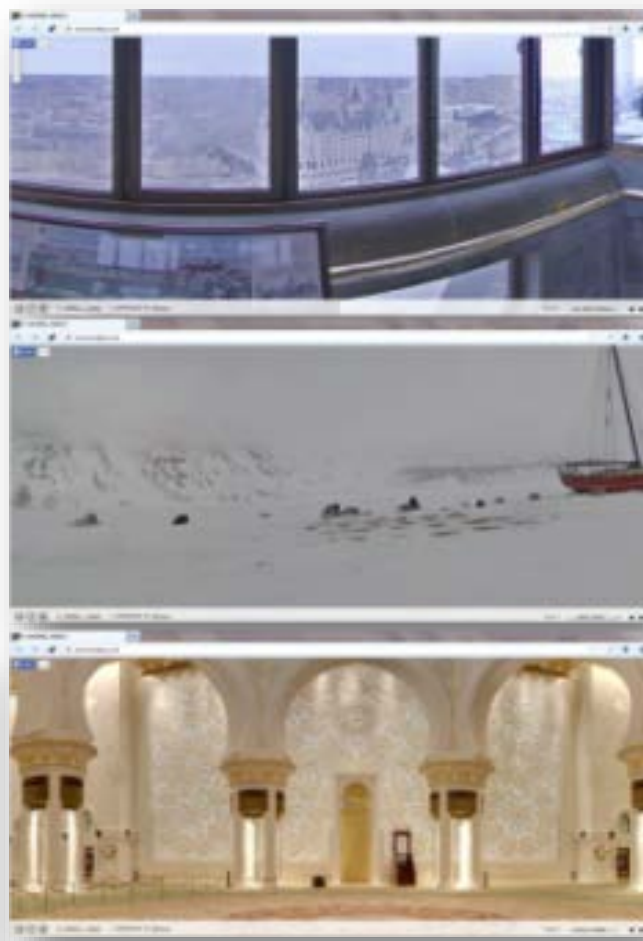


Figure 84

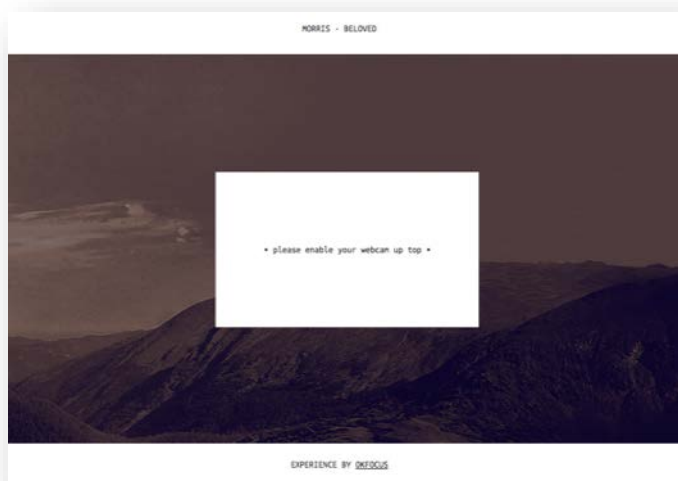


Figure 85



Figure 86



Figure 87



Figure 88



Figure 89



Figure 90



Figure 91



Figure 92



Figure 93



Figure 94

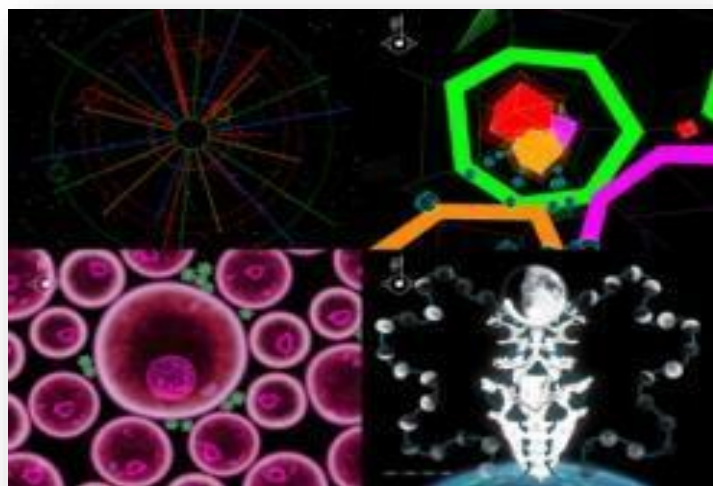


Figure 95



Figure 96

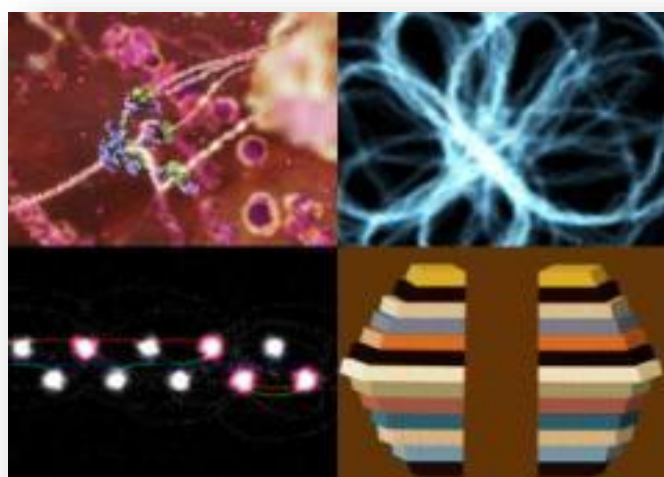


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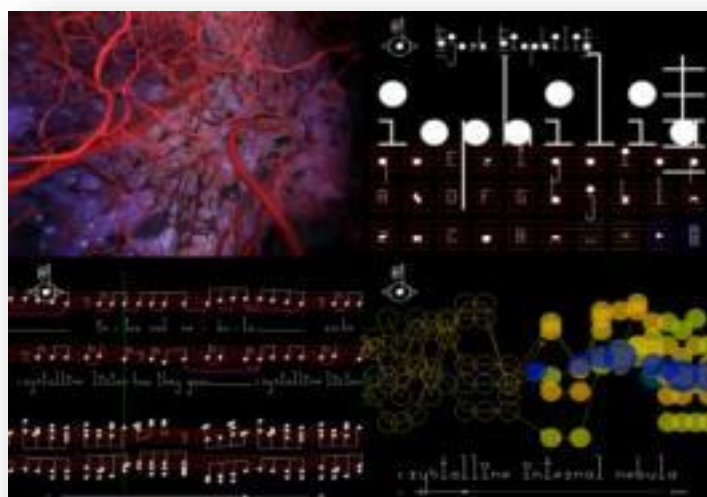


Figure 98



Figure 99



Figure 100

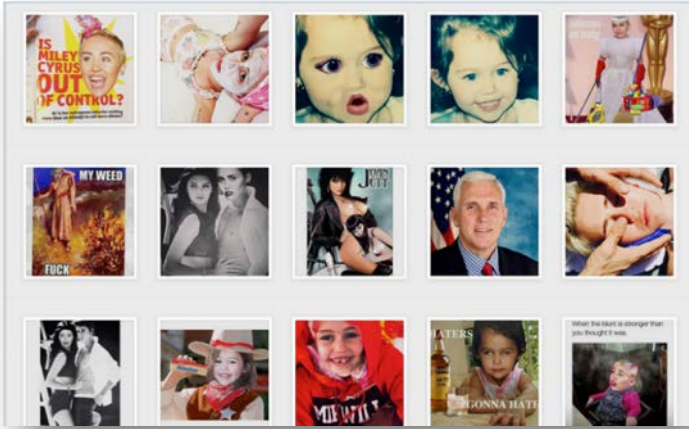


Figure 101



Figure 102



Figure 103



Figure 104



Figure 105



Figure 106



Figure 107



Figure 108



Figure 109



Figure 110



Figure 111



Figure 112



Figure 113



Figure 104



Figure 115

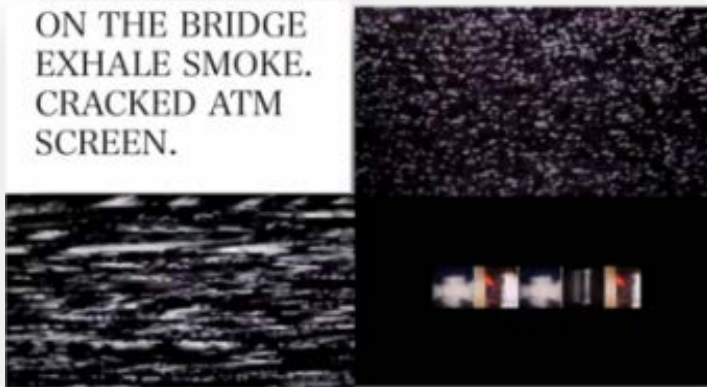


Figure 117



Figure 116



Figure 118

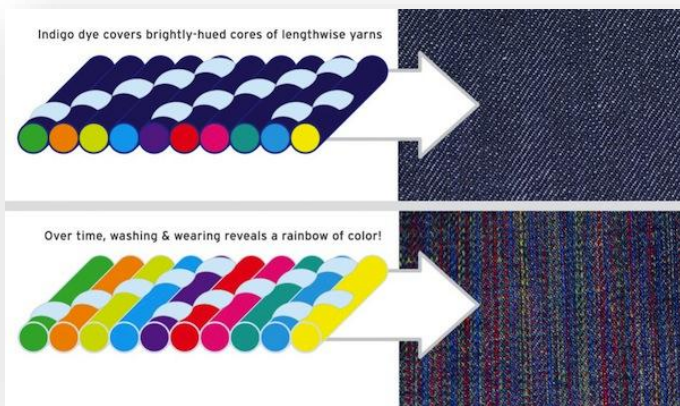


Figure 119

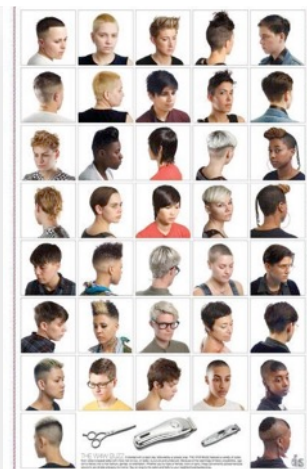


Figure 120



Figure 121



Figure 122



Figure 123



Figure 124



Figure 125

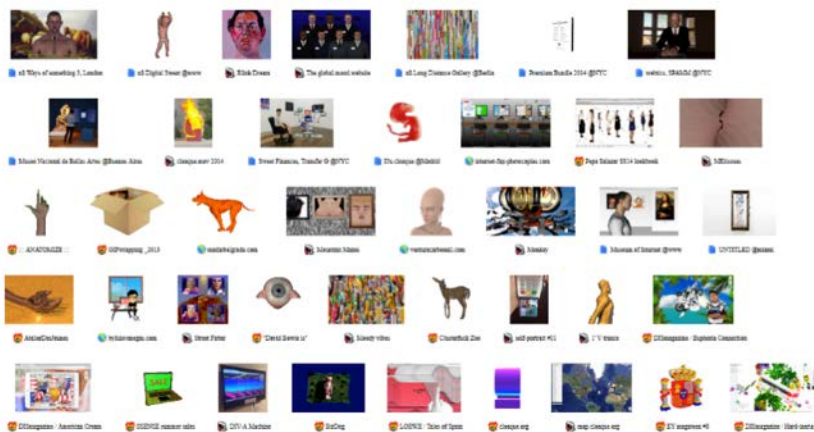


Figure 126



Figure 127



Figure 128



Figure 129



Figure 130



Figure 139



Figure 140



Figure 141



Figure 142



Figure 143



Figure 144



Figure 145

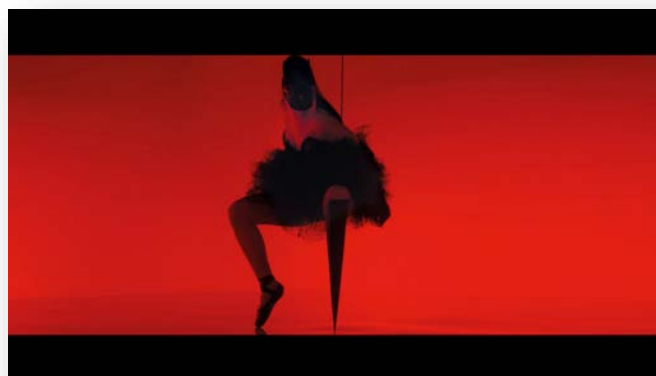


Figure 146

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PC Music SXSW Showcase (19th March, 2015), PC Music (Austin: SXSW & PC Music)

Polymorphism x Janus (10th October, 2014), *Janus*, Lotic, KABLAM, Jam City, Total Freedom, M.E.S.H., boyChild, TCF & DJ HVAD (Berlin: *Janus*, *CTM Festival* & Berghain)

QT Ray-Ban x Boiler Room LA Performance (22nd August, 2014), QT [*YouTube Streamed Live Performance*] (USA: *Boiler Room*)

Rihanna – ‘Diamonds’: Live on SNL (10th November, 2012), Rihanna [Televised Live Performance] (USA: Rihanna, Def Jam Recordings & *Saturday Night Live*)

SOPHIE Ray-Ban x Boiler Room LA DJ Set (22nd August, 2014), SOPHIE [*YouTube Streamed Live Performance*] (USA: *Boiler Room*)

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BLOG APPENDIX (LINK & ACCESS INFORMATION)

Link: <https://michaelwaughthesis.wordpress.com>

Username: MSJW100

Password: postInternet1

LIST OF APPENDICES

ⁱ Recent doctoral theses such as Joanne Coates' 'Exploring digitised, networked milieu: the Cardiff independent music sector in the age of immaterial product' (2012) are astute in their studies of the overall changes to music culture and its impact on music generally, but fail to note the more experimental ways in which musicians and artists are engaging with these phenomena that are now relatively commonplace. Christopher Scott Leary's thesis 'Composing in the Internet age of post-auratic art' (2012) is another useful and interesting piece of work, but is musicological rather than contextual and similarly does not explore the increasingly multimedia-based musical production techniques outlined here.

ⁱⁱ Many of the musicians selected have a background in academic study or artistic practice, and they maintain a self-consciously theoretical approach to their musical production. Fatima Al Qadiri, KABLAM, Kelela, Lotic, Ryan Trecartin, James Ferraro, 18+, Venus X, Jam City and most of the artists on the PC Music label have been educated in cultural/media/fashion/fine art studies to at least undergraduate (and, in several cases, postgraduate) level, while ADR, Finn Diesel and Arca referred frequently to their own academic research into digital art, contemporary fashion and queer identity respectively in the interviews conducted for this thesis with them. Aliina Astrova, who has substantial links to Hype Williams, is a bachelor of Art Criticism and Curating and has thus made strong connections in the art world generally and Mykki Blanco has used his musical platform to breed academic discussion 'about the cultures, gender politics and patriarchy that shape our society' (Blanco, 23 March 2015). Holly Herndon is currently pursuing a doctorate in Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, while Lil B and Kanye West have given multiple lectures to undergraduate students at many of the world's leading universities. This indicates an intrinsic connection between Post-Internet musicians and contemporary academic study, which renders these artists even more worthy of analysis and suggests that most of them are self-reflexive in their engagement with the ideas outlined in this thesis.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is worth noting that one issue of identity that is not covered in this thesis is that of race and nationality. This is, of course, a huge topic – and it is one that many of the musicians here do engage with – that is worthy of in-depth examination. Given the scope and length of this thesis, however, it became impractical to offer a full and thorough analysis of such a key subject area without compromising on other critical aspects of the thesis. Furthermore, contemporary racial and national identity politics in popular music remain tied to concepts far beyond the Post-Internet ideas that motivate my arguments, thus rendering the topic too vast for study here. It is a subject that merits further investigation elsewhere, however, with artists such as FKA twigs, Death Grips, Dean Blunt, Lil B, Fatima Al Qadiri, Elysia Crampton, Mykki Blanco and Lotic all exhibiting an interest in using their music and the web to break down or blur the limitations of racial and national identity (for some discussion of these ideas, see Lotic, thesis interview, 2014; Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014). Similarly, interviewees including Jam City and Fatima Al Qadiri expressed distaste for western music that merely pastiches or steals from sounds pioneered by musicians from under-represented cultures, races and nationalities (an issue referred to in Section Three and Section Nine).

^{iv} Even reviews or think-pieces that seem to disagree with retromanic arguments (such as Hancox, 2009; Gabriele, 2011; and Sandhu, 2011) in fact frequently show a preoccupation with similar frameworks of innovation to those lamented by Reynolds, Fisher and Morley. See, for instance, Alex Niven's 2014 article in *The Quietus*, which claims to be celebrating the progressive sounds of contemporary pop while simultaneously asserting that it is 'undoubtedly true that the cultural scene is still dominated by various manifestations of postmodern retro' (Niven, 2014). There is also Philip Sherburne's 'A New Futurism In Dance Music?' (March 2015), which praises many of the artists analysed in this thesis but continues to maintain that progression and futurism are the benchmark by which post-millennial musical worth should be measured. He reiterates Reynolds' view that 2000s 'popular music has seemed largely to be spinning its wheels', but his argument that the innovations of contemporary musicians are a 'welcome corrective to our long period of retromaniacally marking time' simply upholds twentieth century ideas of popular musical historiographies (ibid). While it is positive that writers are noting novelty in the work of these musicians, as argued in this thesis this framework and terminology is incompatible with the restructured temporality and spatiality of Post-Internet musical milieu.

^v Jam City was the only interviewee that seemed overtly worried about the web's impact on 'attention spans', explaining that 'the Internet is a massive distraction [that creates] pressure to always be creating new "content" and to rush your art' (Jam City, thesis interview, 2015). He argues that

We need to talk about the Internet in more critical terms. It's not a utopia. [...] We need to start thinking about the emotional cost of a life spent online, bombarded by the same advertising images that

gloat at us from billboards. We need to talk about Internet porn and its effect on the brain. What about the loneliness that comes from spending a life online? [...] Your work is simply meaningless content, piles of which are shovelled throughout the blogs and aggregators every day, and we have to fight this information overload (ibid)

Interestingly, these themes drive his sonic output and suggest an interest in progression despite the pressure to retrospectively draw on the overwhelming prominence of pan-global/pan-temporal cultural material online (see Section Nine).

^{vi} *DIS Magazine* 'is run on communal lines', to the extent that its editors 'only answer [...] questions communally' (Haj-Najafi, August 2011). The editors avoid notions of a singular authorial voice, instead exploring the interactive multiplicity of Post-Internet existence and emphasising the role of the 'audience' in the creation and curation of digital art. They believe that singularity, and the idea of genius, is incompatible with the Post-Internet world's complex identity politics and preoccupation with flowing communicative platforms. The artists that they promote play with persona, identity and the audience-artist relationship to explore the communal nature of Post-Internet culture. It is worth mentioning *DIS*' role in the development of the word 'selfie'. This now-ubiquitous word, which has come to mean a self-portrait photograph used on social networking sites, was coined in the early-2000s but came to prominence – prior to its eventual cultural ubiquity – when it titled an artistic experiment by *DIS* in which various participants would take photographs of themselves (already a popular pastime on social media) and upload them to the magazine's *Tumblr* page. This amplified the relationship between the physical and virtual identities of these Post-Internet contributors, as the 'selfies' – representations of the 'organic' self – were communally gathered together in a digital environment.

^{vii} For example, in 2013 the magazine hosted mixes by vocalist Glasser, producer Slugabed and producer Ria Ekin, using *SoundCloud* as the host for each. Yet they presented the mixes in distinct interactive visual surroundings, utilising online technology to amplify the inseparable relationship between the music and the digital realm in a Post-Internet culture. Glasser's mix, *L'otion* (see Figure 110), is augmented by a moving GIF animation of the artist playing with a digitally animated cube and a transcribed interview about her 'favourite topical creams' (*DIS*, November 2013). Slugabed's mix, in comparison (titled *Sitting on the Ceiling Trying to Eat Cereal*), is hosted upside-down, as if hanging from 'the ceiling' of the computer screen, backgrounded by a GIF of pouring milk and surrounded by cascading cereal graphics (see Figure 111). Ekin's *Modified Branded Landscapes* is arguably the most representative of the *DIS* aesthetic in practice, as it can only be played once the listener has unblocked pop-ups on their browser (with the browser consequently becoming overwhelmed with numerous advertisements 'marketing' the mix) and is decorated with logos for huge global brands such as Nike, T-Mobile and Apple (see Figure 112). This is a knowing reference to the hyper-corporate sphere that is the virtual plaza: practically everything online is consumable and marketable, and it is impossible to use the web without being surrounded by commoditisation (even on a non-profit avant-garde website).

^{viii} Shanzhai Biennial, controlled by so-called 'fake capitalist' Babak Radboy (Ugelvig, March 2015), is a fake label whose work 'subvert[s] the brand logos of Apple, Head & Shoulders and Hollister' (Figure 113) in direct reference to the virtual plaza's proliferation of corporate branding (Williams, 2014, p. 113). The label collaborates extensively with key *DIS* artists and musicians such as Ryan Trecartin and Fatima Al Qadiri. Similarly, 'normcore' and 'homogeneity'-inspired designer Telfar Clemens (who works alongside Radboy and his collaborators) explores the omniscience of images in Post-Internet culture through customisable street-clothing that self-consciously advertises photographs of his other designs while highlighting the corporatised nature of online cultures in hyperbolically glossy commercials (Catarinella, 2014, p. 113) (see Figure 114). His style, described as 'mainstream surrealism', embraces the imagery of digital hyper-capitalism that defines *DIS*' virtual plaza aesthetic but exaggerates it to the extent that 'the normal is idealised, re-imagined and "made-avant-garde", transforming it into a subject of aesthetic and philosophical contemplation' (Ugelvig, March 2015). #BEENTRILL#, described by *Dazed* magazine as 'Post-Internet polymaths', are preoccupied with deliberately 'transforming youth culture's candid relationship with the virtual world into [a network of] 3D body scans [and] bootlegged t-shirts' (Oliver, 2014, p. 66-67). This fuses animated 'Internet' art with the 'real' world discipline of fashion design. VFiles, a label that shares members with the founders of *DIS* (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014) takes a comparable approach to the other designers. They draw on

the art world's Post-Internet sensibility; obsessed with nostalgic aesthetic throwbacks to the symbols of Web 1.0, cryptic philosophical statements, collaborative practices, blurring gender codes, and the accelerationist insider flexibility of normcore and health goth. [They are] founded and staffed by a generation who grew up online and who utilise, communicate and are informed by the hyper connected

world we live in [and] the vibrant unfiltered visual maximalism of the world wide web (French, March 2015)

These are themes and aesthetics that occur throughout the oeuvre of *DIS* and its collaborators, and that are the focus of this thesis as a whole.

^{ix} *DIS* incorporates these artists and more into its all encompassing ‘Best and Worst’ feature, which is an uncompromisingly brutal collection of reviews of artistic and consumerist products from all backgrounds. In this feature the editors do not differentiate between the so-called avant-garde and corporate culture. There is no favouritism toward populist work, but there is conversely no attempt to be countercultural to the point of abstraction. Radboy suggests that the magazine’s aesthetic upholds a ‘twenty-first century end game of counterculture. [It] doesn’t counter culture: it totally embraces the mainstream, [locating an overcode] between corporate culture, the body industry, mass-market apparel, retail environments, pop-culture, social networks, etc.’ (Radboy, quoted in Duncan, August 2012). What *DIS* highlights is a reciprocal relationship between mainstream corporate culture and the subcultures of the Internet. This is evocative of the concept of the virtual plaza (as there is an acceptance of the proliferation of capitalism in the lives of the Post-Internet generation) while also echoing the ways in which the hyper-saturation of information noise has distorted the boundaries between high and low cultural material. Highly visible companies and artists utilise the Internet as a medium for advertising and promotion, and both audiences and independent artists are so enveloped by this vast quantity of commerce that they are incapable of truly distancing their lives or work from it. This explains why a magazine that aims to be oppositional and avant-garde is simultaneously so preoccupied with the mainstream and commercial products: in the virtual plaza it becomes increasingly difficult to separate corporate culture and counterculture. Many artistic representations of the Post-Internet experience stress this ambiguity. As the editors have argued,

Rebellion isn’t as important to us as questioning value systems. We want to raise issues and raise a voice against the prevailing ideas. We hope that *DIS* the zine and *DIS* the attitude can be something constructive. [...] Our “Best and Worst” are always pretty constructive. We like to do more than diss. We try to offer constructive criticism and suggest positive alternatives to disappointing collections (Haj-Najafi, August 2011)

Despite the aggressive nature of their reviews, the editors aim to be ‘constructive’ in their criticism. However, they will not sacrifice honesty and bluntness when outlining their ‘positive alternatives’, as to do so would limit the power of their ‘voice against the prevailing ideas’. *DIS* act in opposition to dominant forms and themes, but they do not necessarily take an antagonistic stance to the ‘mainstream’ in this opposition. Indeed, they frequently seek to subvert the norm by criticising the work of glamorous auteurs and praising the most sordid commercial products. *The New York Times* explains that the ‘Post-Internet lifestyle magazine’ affords ‘the same reverence [to] the mainstream streetwear designer Christian Audigier’ as it does to experimental designer Rei Kawakubo, and reviews deodorising Axe Body Spray ‘with the fervour most style blogs reserve for a Frédéric Malle perfume’ (Hawgood, November 2012). There are two aims with this approach. The first, as has already been suggested, is to stress that life and commerce have seemingly become inseparable in the Post-Internet era. Anti-capitalist art appears to be rendered futile in an environment driven by absolute commercial dominance. As such, *DIS* affords the same admiration to products or artworks regardless of their economic aspirations, in direct mockery of anyone that retains the ideological belief that web-based ‘avant-garde’ art remains untainted by commercialism. The second aim is to promote fashion or art that is ‘grosser than gross’ (Haj-Najafi, August 2011), regardless of its background. *DIS* explores the possibility that Post-Internet shock value is not necessarily located in avant-garde art, but is instead found in the garish commercial products of the mainstream. They want to promote and produce art that is intrinsically ‘NOW’ (ibid), and so it seems natural to afford space to reviews of apparently ugly corporate ‘design’. If there is one thing that continues to engender an angry or shocked reaction in ‘authentic’ art circles, it is promotion of the corporate culture that they frequently set themselves against. *DIS*’ tactics, then, remind Post-Internet audiences that their supposed online counterculture is inevitably inseparable from the commercialism that it seeks to undermine. The virtual plaza offers false freedoms, according to *DIS*. In fact, its users are contributing more powerfully to corporations than ever before. This results in a self-consciousness that does not ignore the dominance of capitalist imagery and consumerism in Post-Internet life.

^x *DIS* ‘seeks to dissolve conventions, distort realities, disturb ideologies, dismember the establishment, and disrupt the dismal dissemination of fashion discourse’ (*DIS*, March 2010). Its collaborators maintain a belief in oppositional disruption to normative forms. They critique ‘obvious’ nostalgia in art and fashion, believing that

retrospective referentiality lacks invention and purpose (Haj-Najafi, August 2011), and rely instead on ‘gross’ images, sounds and ideas to shock audiences (ibid). The rejection of sounds and images that bear the warmth of nostalgia is perhaps borne from distaste for the retromanic nature of ‘Internet’ (as opposed to ‘Post-Internet’) culture. The artists’ forward looking work exploits post-millennial technology, employing the most contemporary references and memes to avoid accusations of being preoccupied with a comforting pre-digital past.

^{xi} Moore, Grossberg and Auslander have also discussed the notion of ‘self-conscious’ postmodern authenticity (Moore, 2002, p. 214). Grossberg suggests that there are three dominant strands of authenticity: ‘that of rock (founded in the romanticised ideology of the community), of black genres (founded on the rhythmicised and sexual body), and that of self-conscious postmodernity’ (Moore, 2002, p. 214). This concept of postmodern authenticity (or ‘meta-authenticity’ [Fornäs, quoted in Moore, 2002, p. 215]) is worth exploring further. Moore explains that postmodern authenticity relates to ‘showing honesty in the acceptance of cynical self-knowledge’ (Moore, 2002, p. 214), and uses the example of The Pet Shop Boys to emphasise this. He quotes Leach, who argues that Neil Tennant’s supposed inability to play ‘real’ instruments live (because of the band’s use of synthesizers) does not prevent the group’s fans from deeming them authentic. Rather, it makes them appear more honest to certain audiences, as they do not hide behind a performance of traditionally authentic characteristics (ibid). Postmodern authenticity validates

‘synthetic’ texts through the evidenced meta-reflexivity of their authors. [This] is particularly marked as an authentication of the author. [...] Fornäs argues that authenticity is not directly opposed to artificiality since authenticity is, after all, necessarily a construction we place upon what we perceive (Moore, 2002, p. 215)

This concept of postmodern authenticity has been applied to artists as diverse as David Bowie, Gorillaz, Lady Gaga and Prince, and has been used to justify their music as innovative and honest, despite their apparently synthetic and malleable personas and musical stylisation. This is an application of Moore’s ‘second person authenticity’, as the artists ‘speak’ to a sceptical postmodern audience through their techniques of irony, playfulness and intertextuality regardless of their subversion of traditional notions of authenticity. Although Keightley describes a number of these artists as modernist, arguing that their ‘complex and nuanced’ identities are experimental and shocking (Keightley, 2001, p. 138), their oeuvres are informed by postmodern irony and scepticism toward the grand narrative that is a conventional definition of ‘authenticity’. There are clear connections to be made here with the fact that audiences are able to locate authenticity in the self-conscious work of Post-Internet musicians, despite the transparency of their premeditated representations of Post-Internet experiences and themes.

Auslander makes a distinction between modernist experimentation and postmodern playfulness in his analysis of authenticity and performance in *Liveness* (1999). *Liveness* explores the concept of postmodern authenticity in greater detail than Moore, drawing on crises of authenticity in popular music’s history to reveal the problematic nature of the ‘inauthenticity’ of postmodern artists. Auslander is primarily concerned with authenticity in relation to production and reproduction within the music industry. He problematises the supposedly subversive postmodern ‘authentic inauthenticity’ of artists such as Bowie, Gorillaz, Elton John and Alice Cooper (Auslander, 1999, p. 102), arguing that the ‘frequency and extremity of [the] transformations’ of these artists results in a ‘claim to authenticity [...] derived from the knowledge and admission of [their] inauthenticity’ (ibid). Indeed, this can be linked strongly again to Moore’s concept of second person authenticity. The ‘knowledge and admission’ of the inauthentic nature of Bowie’s changeability and ‘fake’ personas becomes ‘authentic’ in itself due to its self-consciousness. The audience is privy to the humour and irony that these artists are drawing from subversions of previous ideologies of authenticity. The ‘realness’, ‘honesty’ or ‘truth’ comes from these artists’ knowing postmodern exposures of the mechanisms involved in the construction of both romantic and modernist ‘authentic’ personas. Yet, according to Auslander, postmodern authenticity simply cements the very doctrines that its apparent openness claims to undermine. The problem arises from the fact that Bowie and others merely generate a pastiche of rock musical styles and images, and emphasise the conventionality of their characterisation at the same time as they amplify its obvious artificiality (Auslander, 1999, p. 102). Auslander contrasts this concept of postmodern authenticity with the 1990 Grammy Awards during which Milli Vanilli controversially won the ‘Best New Artist’ award to suggest that genuine threats to doctrines of authenticity come from less self-conscious sources. The media furor around this victory, which stemmed from Milli Vanilli’s subsequent admission of lip-syncing due to their inability to perform their songs live, indicates that the postmodern authenticity foregrounded by self-consciously synthetic artists is not actually all that subversive. Live performance is a critical part of rock musical authentication, as it is necessary

for an audience to witness an artist being able to ‘cut it’ live in to confirm their musical integrity, with Milli Vanilli’s inability to do so generating genuine uproar among ‘rock’ audiences (ibid). Auslander’s comparison between Hendrix and The Monkees is another key example of this. On record, The Monkees ‘compare favourably with the work of The Beatles’, but their inauthenticity stems from the ‘other knowledge that the rock fan brings to the record’; more specifically, that they did not play their own instruments or write their own songs (Auslander, 1999, pp. 87-88). He argues that artists must have a history of impressive live performances to justify bearing the tag of authenticity, and that they must be able to reproduce their recorded creations to a respectable standard in a live environment (Auslander, 1999, pp. 88-90). This was especially prevalent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when romantic authenticity was predominant and ideologies about utilising traditional instrumentation were crucial to rock and folk music. During the 1980s this stance began to shift somewhat, as new wave, post-punk and the rise of electronic dance music resulted in changes to conventional authenticity definitions, with liveness becoming decreasingly important. Auslander quotes Frith and Grossberg, both of whom suggest that the 1980s was a time of change. It was the era during which the ‘instant star’ was born, and the need for live justification became marginalised (Auslander, 1999, p. 99). This resulted in a crisis within rock culture, as traditionalists lamented an era in which integrity was championed (ibid).

It is because of this crisis that the Milli Vanilli incident becomes relevant, and postmodern authenticity’s critique appears weakened. Although the 1980s had seemingly assuaged audience concerns about synthetic music, electronic sounds and the role of live performance, a lip-syncing artist winning a major music award was seemingly too ‘fake’ for rock traditionalists to tolerate. Auslander compares this incident with musical successes of the following years, such as Eric Clapton’s acoustic blues performances on *MTV Unplugged* and the rise of grunge/Britpop and their ‘back-to-basics’ romanticism, to explain that rock music used the Milli Vanilli incident to ‘regenerate a reality principle in distress’ (Baudrillard, quoted in Auslander, 1999, p. 109). The music media made Milli Vanilli’s lip-syncing into a major scandal to re-establish lost values of authenticity and live performance. Popular music audiences feared an actual move away from traditional authenticating values of virtuosity and honesty far more than self-conscious chameleonic attempts to subvert or critique them. Auslander suggests that lip-syncing offers a much greater threat to norms of popular musical authenticity than any postmodern ‘subversion’ of the concept:

Authentic inauthenticity is not [...] the same thing as the pop ideology represented by Milli Vanilli. Authentic inauthenticity, which demands that performers acknowledge and assert their own inauthenticity, defines itself against traditional rock authenticity. It thus reasserts the original meaning of authenticity in rock even while critiquing it. Although it revels in its own inauthenticity [it] nevertheless takes rock’s ideology of authenticity as its point of reference and is therefore allied with that ideology in a way that pop [is] not (Auslander, 1999, p. 115)

The issue, then, is that self-consciously postmodern artists deliberately define themselves as specifically oppositional to traditional notions of authenticity. Their refusal to construct a public persona that aligns itself with the grand narrative of ‘authenticity’ ironically renders these postmodern musicians ‘honest’ to a public entrenched in the same sceptical view of the concept. They are therefore, to paraphrase Auslander, ‘authentically inauthentic’, and thus ultimately provide little subversion of the idea of authenticity; just an alternative version of it. In contrast, Milli Vanilli and other artists without an aura of self-consciousness do not aim to critique directly, but by simply ‘faking it’ (Taylor and Barker, 2007) they offer a far greater threat to the concept of authenticity in rock music. Less self-conscious approaches to reproduction have been far more damaging to conventional authenticating discourses than the ‘safe’ subversions of authentically inauthentic musicians, as they threaten to reveal the very apparatus that mark doctrines of popular musical authenticity out to be constructs in themselves. Auslander’s argument effectively is that postmodern authenticity is weakened by the fact that it is too knowing and ironic in its approach. Pop music subverts and critiques authenticating discourses itself, without the need for self-conscious mutability. The artists outlined in this thesis, despite their self-consciousness regarding authenticity debates, do not claim to be critiquing the concept in the same way as these postmodern musicians, however. As noted throughout the interviews organised for this thesis, there remains a belief in honesty from many of the interviewees. These musicians seek to express and echo the experiences of the Post-Internet condition to achieve an authentic reputation with contemporary audiences. Fans may be fully aware of the self-reflexive nature of their approach, but that does not limit the reception of their truthful portrayals of Post-Internet cultural experience.

^{xii} Laughey considers this in relation to eventual mainstream successes such as The Arctic Monkeys, whose commercial recognition was supposedly due predominantly to ‘the power of message boards’ (Laughey, 2007, p. 180). He explains that fans were able to use blogs, message boards and online distribution networks to get the

band noticed, meaning that ‘instead of following the traditional route of being “spotted” by record industry A&R people’, or indeed gaining publicity from mainstream music magazines, the group was ‘brought to the attention of industry figures through online consumer interest’ (ibid). Although it could be argued that this is a naïve acceptance of the band’s origin narrative (which could easily have been exaggerated or distorted by a major label looking to establish its signees’ authentic ties to the Post-Internet milieu), the example remains useful for illuminating the importance that ‘sharity’ culture and online communicative channels maintain in discourse surrounding twenty-first century music distribution and exposure.

^{xiii} One interesting development of the contemporary musical milieu has been the rise of ‘academic’ blogs, which attempt to incorporate theoretical discussions into the populist sphere of blog culture. Given the increasing prominence of these phenomena, as well as their potential to communicate successfully with the hyper-connected Post-Internet generation, academic blogs have been widely contemplated in a number of publishing and education-based contemporary journals (for example, blogging’s potential employment in higher-educational institutions has been analysed extensively by Kirkup [2010], Martin and Hughes [2012], Ziegler [2007], Maitzen [2012], and Mewburn and Thomson [2013]). However, where academic blogging has achieved the most success to date is within the area of popular culture (including music), which is likely due to the ease with which this subject matter can locate and maintain a sizeable online audience. As noted by Lothian-McLean,

There’s been a discernible desire [...] to start properly examining and analysing the culture we’re surrounded by. [The] majority of these pieces that dissect the big ideas are usually prompted or centred around the music industry. [...] What has been created is an on-going discourse, a back and forth across the reaches of the Internet, concerning some of the most challenging concepts we deal with as humans. [Online] musical analysis has become a prism, splintering and refracting the ‘big questions’ into manageable and palatable articles for our consumption (Lothian-McLean, December 2014)

There are numerous examples of this, including Simon Reynolds’ *Blissblog*, Mark Fisher’s *k-punk*, Adam Harper’s *Rouge’s Foam*, the now-defunct *Hyperdub* blog, Alex Maxpherson’s *Lex Is More* and Angus Finlayson’s *Minor Science*. Many of these blogs explore online music cultures in ways as yet under-analysed in conventional academia. Linked strongly with the rise of online criticism within the arts as a whole, these academically inspired music blogs have ignited significant communication and debate with their readership, as well as with one another. It was, for example, on these blogs that Reynolds and Fisher began their discussions about retromanic tendencies in online culture (subsequently drawn on by Paul Morley in the music blog section of *The Guardian*), while Harper’s critique of this negative approach is central to his blog. Despite these debates generally being led by academics or critics that already hold significant capital due to their previous work, there is perhaps potential here for further subversion of the twentieth century ‘top-down’ power systems; in this case, with specific reference to the academy. Academia is as discriminatory as journalism in its curatorial structure, albeit from a more formal and theoretical standpoint (see Quirk and Toynbee, 2005). It also retains the same problems of non-instantaneous publication schedules that do not resonate with Post-Internet readers. The debates that emerge online are certainly not as richly researched, formally written or intensively reviewed as traditional academia, but their immediacy and subsequent ability to maintain pace with increasing exposure to new music and constantly changing ideas about style, genre, scene and novelty can often make their reflections more relevant to a Post-Internet culture. Laing argues that ‘the persistence of outdated critical ideologies has further isolated much music journalism from [online] mainstream audiences’ (Laing, 2006, p. 339), and this applies equally to formal academic discourse. Post-Internet culture moves so rapidly that it is impossible for academia to maintain pace with its shifts. This is the reason for the dated nature of the vast majority of academic writing about the Internet and popular music. Perhaps a culture as fluid and fast-paced as the Post-Internet world requires a more instantaneous and flexible system of discourse to consider its connotations and themes more acutely. Online academic blogs retain their own problems, of course. Their immediacy and informality can often result in overly casual language or even inflammatory argument rather than measured academic debate. However, it is worth noting that many key texts about contemporary culture, such as *Retromania* (2011) and Harper’s *Infinite Music* (2011), were conceived in these academic blogs (these are texts that have ultimately motivated formal academic debate), and that many of the genres theorised by these critics (such as vaporwave [see Section Five], collage-esque club music [see Section Nine] or Harper’s exploration of ‘wonky’ dubstep [June 2009]) will inevitably fail to receive an adequate level of analysis by the academy as they have generally become outdated styles by the time journals or monographs are published. Leloup suggests that blogging culture is formed from ‘a manifest ethics of exchange and participation which exerts a deep influence on today’s artists’ (Leloup, 2010, pp. 158-159), and academic blogging is a significant part of this. It is through these blogs, for instance, that terms such as ‘virtual plaza’ and ‘information noise’ have been able to develop, resulting in a

situation in which those engaged with this music fully are able to theorise about it themselves, instead of relying on the (often outdated) analysis of traditional academic forms. Blogging enables academics to consider the Post-Internet milieu more frequently and immediately than within research institutions, and it has become a useful resource for initiating debate within more conventional and formal discourses.

^{xiv} It must be noted, however, that PC Music has come under substantial criticism for its ironic flippancy with regard to serious issues of race and gender. For example, Kretowicz notes that there is a trend toward ‘female appropriation’ in the label’s output (Kretowicz, December 2014). Although she praises PC Music’s sound, ‘their music is represented by women acting out gender stereotypes’, which she regards as problematic given that the roster is ‘mostly men, predominantly white, probably straight, surely educated’ (ibid). Given the ‘gender imbalance’ that she notes in electronic musical production more generally, Kretowicz believes that the label should ‘be more open about their own identities and the creative roles of the women they work with’ to enhance the subversive power of their ‘post-human genderfuck’ and encourage wider recognition for female producers (ibid). One controversial event that highlighted the label’s tendency to belittle serious issues came in June 2015, when singer/producer GFOTY wrote a ‘review’ of 2015’s *Field Day Festival* for *Vice* (GFOTY, 2015). The review was typically sardonic, with GFOTY playing up to her public persona as an exaggeratedly narcissistic and vacuous social networker (see Section Six). Yet GFOTY took her performance into deeply troubling territory with a highly problematic racist remark about Malian musicians Toumani and Sidiki Diabaté. She referred to the duo as a ‘tribal band [covering] Bombay Bicycle [sic] Club blacked up’ (ibid). While clearly being ironic (she later apologised via *Twitter*, explaining that it had been a poorly conceived joke about appropriation [GFOTY, 8 June 2015]), there is of course little excuse for comments of that ilk. Post-Internet musicians such as Lotic (via *Facebook*) and Le1f (via *Twitter*, archived in Leight, 2015) chastised GFOTY and her label for their insensitive humour, with Lotic going so far as to argue that PC Music is ‘merely a vapid art project by a handful of rich kids (mostly male, with female avatars BTW) [whose] “conceptual” and “mysterious” [personas] usually turn out to be an abdication of responsibility’ (Lotic, 8 June 2015). As white, heterosexual, educated (predominantly male) musicians, PC Music must be careful when seeking to represent those from marginalised cultures and spaces, and they have a ‘responsibility’ when making inflammatory public remarks whether they are intended to be taken sincerely or not. The label, to their credit, swiftly tweeted a condemnation of GFOTY’s comments, stating that they were ‘completely inexcusable’ and ‘do not reflect our ethos to create an inclusive musical environment and community of people from all backgrounds’ (PC Music, 9 June 2015). However, these issues illuminate the fine line between producing honest self-conscious parodies/critiques of the Post-Internet experience and simply perpetuating the serious socio-political problems of contemporary culture.

^{xv} Lauren Devine – another ‘pop star’ generated by *DIS* and its collaborators – operates in a similar mould to #HDBOYZ. Her sound is equally clichéd and features a corresponding use of autotune, although her lyrical approach is arguably even more informed by the kitschy virtual plaza imagery evoked by vaporwave. As collaborator ADR explains, she deliberately employs ‘a sound that is often seen as “basic” or unsophisticated by many of [her] creative peers’ (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). Her 2013 song ‘Try Sexual’ utilises the same digital puns and meme references as those of #HDBOYZ (for example, the *Twitter* hashtag ‘#DTT’ [or ‘down to try’]), but it is her 2012 track ‘This Is How We Do Dubai’ that is perhaps her most interesting ironic take on Post-Internet culture. The title, refrain and artwork (see Figure 115) refer to the hyper-corporate and futuristic UAE city in the same celebratory terms that other pop music reserves for places of beauty (Paris and Rome, for instance) or cities famed for their party atmosphere (Las Vegas, London, New York, etc.). The shopping malls of Dubai, as highlighted in Kretowicz’s study of UAE plazas (Kretowicz, December 2013), are spaces in which ‘hyper-capital [is] made material, [where] consumerism [is] taken to its logical consequence’ (ibid). Dubai, in other words, is the ‘physical’ manifestation of the ‘virtual’ plaza: a place in which capitalism and corporate culture are absolute, and every aspect of society is designed to encourage financial transaction: ‘in a labyrinthine network of air-conditioned bridges, trains and travelators, all roads lead to the shopping mall’ (ibid). It is therefore significant that Devine, given her comparable thematic approach to #HDBOYZ and PC Music, has named her party anthem in admiration for the city. She is suggesting that, as a member of the Post-Internet generation, she is so heavily afflicted by the corporate dominance of the virtual plaza that shopping malls (and the extreme examples found in Dubai in particular) become authentic spaces. This is, of course, a depressing and unfortunate development. It is an indication that, in a world in which the virtual and the organic are increasingly inseparable, capitalism has claimed absolute victory by rendering itself natural and thus becoming internalised by the Post-Internet generation. Yet it must be noted that Devine is being just as provocative and ironic in her techniques as the artists analysed in Section Five. Her aims are to explore and critique issues surrounding the Post-Internet experience by expressing them in a direct, albeit humorous, pastiche. It is interesting that ‘This Is How We Do Dubai’ features production credits from Laurel Halo, a musician who is

analysed in Section Eight and is frequently praised for her ‘intricate sound design’ (Gibb, May 2012) and sincere contemplation of information overload and contemporary identity politics. This suggests that there are serious themes underpinning Devine’s output.

^{xvi} Popular culture’s fascination with hidden identities has manifested itself in the rise of films such as *Catfish* (Joost and Schulman, 2010) and the subsequent *MTV* spin-off series of the same name. The film and series revolve around the attempts of social networkers to locate and meet people that they have communicated with online. The twists are dependent on the fact that the person they meet is rarely the figure (or avatar) that they have been conned into corresponding with. Highlighting the influence that the show has had, a new definition of the term ‘catfish’ has subsequently entered the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, and is used to describe ‘a person who sets up a false personal profile on a social networking site for fraudulent or deceptive purposes’ (*Merriam-Webster*).

^{xvii} Zomby’s public online ‘identity feels like a stratagem’ (Blanning, August 2011, p. 41). On *Twitter* Zomby is able to say whatever he likes, fearing no repercussions due to his anonymity. He is openly critical of other musicians; arrogant about his own work; and consistently boasts about his wealth and the fact that social media is an irritant to him. Infantile arguments have been started with the similarly named producer Zomboy, dubstep pioneer Benga and various music journalists. However, in the rare instances that Zomby has given interviews, he has presented himself as intelligent and articulate (Parks, June 2011; Wright, February 2010). This seems to suggest that his online persona is carefully constructed in order to amplify its confrontational nature. Though his career has been marked by ‘anecdotes of online antagonism [and] erratic behaviour’ (Blanning, August 2011, p. 37), his invisibility allows him to get away with this sabotage due to his solely web-based interaction. There are few ramifications for his actions – anonymity affords ‘him the opportunity to say what he really thinks’ (Blanning, August 2011, p. 41) – and his ideologies revolve around the wish to

do more music better than [industry-funded stars] and then to take the face and the image away so it could be anybody. [...] How else to make these people shake about the pretence that they’re setting up? [...] To be anonymous is to give power to that. [...] It could be anyone (Zomby, in Blanning, August 2011, p. 41)

Zomby symbolically dons the Guy Fawkes mask worn by ‘hacktivist’ group Anonymous in public, drawing on comparable themes of anti-corporate musical production to those examined in relation to Death Grips in Chapter Four. By simultaneously portraying himself as both anonymous and exaggeratedly transparent, he has attained a reputation for both authentic musical production and truthful exploitation of social media.

^{xviii} Artists that have attained the strongest reputation for authenticity in the web era have not only communicated openly with their fans on *Twitter*; they have also explored the possibilities of allowing those fans to engage with them in more complex ways. One powerful example of this occurred in September and October of 2013, which was a period on *Twitter* titled ‘War Dubs’ by fans of grime music. Joe Muggs explains the events that unfolded during those months in *The Wire*:

On 10 September [...] a challenge was thrown down, followed by a *Twitter* storm and an explosion of [grime] beats. [Following] a few scene stalwarts poking fun at veteran producer Bless Beats [on *Twitter*], [he] put a war dub on *SoundCloud* [...] and others responded in kind, [resulting in] 200-odd tracks by various producers. [The] rival beatmakers [ranged from] long-running authority figure[s] [to] interlopers. [...] Simply mentioning another producer’s name [on *Twitter*] was enough to count as a challenge, [and success was measured on] whether [the war dub] had an instant impact and would get a response from online fans (Muggs, November 2013, p. 57)

The basis of the ‘war’, then, revolved around artists competing to create the most innovative and aggressive grime beats in response to the *Twitter* taunts of other producers. What made the event stand out prominently was the fact that equal exposure was afforded both to major stars within the genre (including Wiley, Preditah and Jammer) as well as newcomers and fans with little previous recognition (such as Inkke and Kahn & Neek). There was no discrimination based on previous success, with the process becoming truly interactive. Various renowned artists would challenge relative amateurs and vice-versa. The fans also had a crucial role to play in the success of each released ‘dub’, as it was their response to the tracks that contributed to the verdict about which had been successful and which had failed to impress. The event produced many tracks that took the grime genre into uncharted and innovative territory, but it was the inclusive approach that rendered it particularly popular with and authentic to contemporary music audiences. This is a critical example of the importance that

interactivity plays within social media. There is a need for artists to engage on many levels with their fans to retain their respect and interest.

^{xix} One high-profile example of this complex relationship between social networking and the self, due to its exposure in key music e-zines such as *Pitchfork*, *Fact* and *The Fader*, involved hip-hop artist and founder of 1017 Brick Squad Records Gucci Mane, who released a tirade of stream-of-conscious tweets in early September 2013. These tweets ranged from abuse toward other artists (including commercially successful rapper Nicki Minaj), to uncomfortably extreme homophobic and misogynistic comments, to surreal and incomprehensible messages with little in the way of a discernible meaning (see Figure 116), and were produced in an apparently random, disorganised stream in the space of a few minutes (Ortiz, September 2013). While the intent of Mane's rant is unclear – it is unknown if the tweets were self-consciously baiting his followers or the result of a personal breakdown – his actions suggest that he, like many others, regards social media as a platform through which each of his inner thoughts and emotions can (or even *must*) be publicised.

^{xx} There are also, of course, commercial benefits to this culture of narcissism. The rise of subscription-fee dating websites and smartphone applications such as *Grindr/Tinder* (which are so ubiquitous that it has become popular to refer to their young users as 'Generation Swipe' [Kemp, 2014]) is indicative of the ways in which the virtual plaza has become a space in which individuals are prepared to pay to promote themselves or formulate/flaunt new identities. Indeed, the virtual plaza (as the ultimate incarnation of the capitalist dream) offers a space in which an individual can literally 'buy' new (virtual) identities, or augment and improve his/her actual 'self' (through the digital 'plastic surgery' of pseudonyms, avatars, etc.). The web's blank canvas of anonymity is a marketable utopia that promises an escape from an individual's 'real' identity into a space of mutability and sterilised self-perfection. The virtual plaza deliberately feeds the insatiable Post-Internet narcissism of its users, due to the fact that this narcissism is intrinsic to its own commercial success.

^{xxi} This is most prominent during the (highly problematic) daily meme of '#girltime', in which Lil B encourages his female fans to tweet photographs of themselves for him to retweet. This meme is not something to be celebrated, and is unfortunately indicative of wider concerns about misogyny in hip-hop culture (Cundiff, 2013; Soderberg, June 2013), but it is notable due to its amplification of Lil B's continuous attempts to turn his fans into 'celebrities'.

^{xxii} Many of James Ferraro's other music videos, located on his *YouTube* channel IguanaCity, offer a similar critique of the role of social media in the construction (and disruption) of identities. The other two 'trailers' for his 2013 album *NYC, HELL 3:00 AM* are predominantly comprised of several recurring tropes: a piece of music from the album itself; amateur found footage of unrelated events; heavy distortion and glitching images; robotic and seemingly unconnected words and phrases; blank screens; and extreme doses of repetition in the visuals and the soundtrack (see Figure 117). Although there is a tendency for critics to note an 'insincerity or ironic mockery in his music' (Bowe, October 2013), thus resulting in a dominant reading of his work as empty or meaningless, these videos suggest a deeper and more critical reflection on the web and its impact. The third trailer, for instance, which begins with the word 'money' being repeated many times, seems to be a direct statement on the highly corporate nature of the virtual plaza. The middle of the video is comprised of discomfiting static and digital animation, deliberately reminding the viewer that the Internet is a key theme in Ferraro's work. The videos are incredibly dark, offering little in the way of humour, and indeed they provide a comparable critique to those of Lil B: an exaggerated image of the impact of virtual spaces on the Post-Internet generation. In the first trailer, a robotic voice juxtaposes profound statements ('love is shaded with hate') with devastating declarations ('this world is dark, so dark'), random pieces of information ('fortieth floor') and informal gossip ('this model is so gross'), with the flatness of its cadence removing any expression or graspable meaning from each assertion. The clip ends with the voice being cut-off mid-sentence while saying that 'sentinels made us feel alone, pushing us to pretend humanity-', evoking similar cyborgian ideas to those of the musicians analysed in Sections Seven and Eight.

^{xxiii} Dean Blunt's *Stone Island* album (2013) is a key example of Hype Williams seeking to provoke audience intrigue. The album was uploaded without promotion to the obscure Russian website *Afisha*. Blunt did not lay claim to the record, despite the site's statement that he had recorded it while touring in Moscow, and it has yet to be (legally/officially) hosted on any site aside from *Afisha*. Yet it is undoubtedly a Blunt album, replete with his unique vocals and the same musical tropes that marked his other 2013 release *The Redeemer*. This suggests a deliberate effort to 'hide' his album from a transparency preoccupied western audience by placing it on a lesser known (and non-English language) website. Additionally, much illegal musical distribution goes through Eastern European forums. The use of Russian characters renders English language search engines useless,

meaning that major labels in the USA and UK struggle to locate and prevent copyright infringement via these sites. Blunt's album is, conversely, distributed *with his consent* by a Russian website, despite being framed by the same characters that have made it so difficult for labels to trace illegal distribution. The album remains hard to find, hidden away as it is in such an isolated section of the web. Perhaps this is Blunt's evocation of the contemporary 'search' for leaked and uploaded music online. In attempting to locate his album, audiences unconsciously inhabit the very processes of intrigue that inform Hype Williams' critique of anonymity, celebrity and transparency.

^{xxiv} These themes can be connected to those of Post-Internet art more widely, with one remarkably similar example being digital creative studio 4REAL's 2015 *Clone Zone* application (Figure 118). It

explore[s] how easily "fact" can be manipulated with the help of social media and how this affects modern journalism [by allowing the user to] enter the URL of the site [they] want to clone. [The] cloned page appears [...] exactly the same as the original, except everything can be edited so you can create your own version – in all the right, authentic-feeling fonts (Saxelby, April 2015)

In other words, the app is designed to simultaneously replicate and critique the fact that 'we are already living in a matrix with machines manipulating us into clicking and liking all sorts of absurd things on our feeds' (4REAL, quoted in Saxelby, April 2015). Post-Internet culture allegedly fails (or at least struggles) to differentiate fully between that which is poignant and important, and that which is simply 'absurd' or meaningless. This is, according to 4REAL, the result of a milieu that is preoccupied with total transparency and quick-read 'clickbait' headlines, with wavering attentions leading to ennui and an inability to focus.

^{xxv} These ideas are strongly inspired by the cut-up/fold-in techniques of William S. Burroughs' 1960s novels. As a gay man and a countercultural heroin addict, Burroughs was determined to break away from conventional language, which he regarded as a device employed by those in power to maintain their dominance. He formulated his own post-structural style that involved cutting up and re-situating words and phrases until he was able to generate a unique subversive language. By removing his own authorial presence (and thus leaving the construction of the novels' narratives to random consequence), Burroughs attempted to divorce 'the self from outwardly (and inwardly) imposed matrices of power and control' (Sterritt, 1998, p. 134) and render the identity of his textual voice posthuman. This technique was expanded on in the mid-1990s through Warwick University's Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit (established by Sadie Plant, Nick Land, Mark Fisher and Steve Goodman, among others), which created an 'anti-academic' language reflective of 'the chemistry of metals, [...] the cycles of capitalism, [...] the non-linear dynamics of the ocean [and] the fractalized breakbeat rhythms of jungle' as an escape from the boundaries of apparently outmoded prior discourse surrounding identity and society (Reynolds, January 2005). This in turn informed Kodwo Eshun's innovative account of the history of black popular musicians, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998), which utilises a difficult and fictional cyborgian Afrofuturist language to describe the sounds of African-American/African-British electronic music (such as jungle, hip-hop, funk and techno) in terms that break away from the limitations of colonial languages and historiographies.

^{xxvi} It is worth noting that posthumanism is a vast subject area that covers significantly more theoretical ground than it is possible to fully examine in this thesis (as is queer commentary), although it has not been applied to contemporary music cultures in the same ways as are offered here. For more on the subject, I recommend texts by Sanden (January 2012) on cyborgian 'virtual liveness' in posthuman music; Bendle (2002) on teleportation and cyborgs; Scheer (2012) on performance and posthumanism; Frentz (2014) on posthuman communication; and Bostrom (April 2003), who asks existential questions regarding computer simulation and contemporary reality. It is also worth exploring the theoretical political concept of 'accelerationism', which is beyond the remit of this thesis but is unified with the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit in its attempts to subvert hyper-capitalism in the twenty-first century through a hyper-technological posthuman existence. Key texts in this field include those of Land (2012), Williams and Srnicek (2013), Mackay and Avanessian (2014), Noys (2014) and Shavri (2015).

^{xxvii} *DIS* heavily supported, for instance, the video project *Community Action Center*, 'an archive of an intergenerational community built on collaboration, friendship, sex and art [exploring] infinitely complex gender and performance roles' (*DIS*, December 2011). The e-zine exhibits satirical products such as 'Gay Jeans with a Straight Fit', which are named in punning reference to the term 'gay genes' and are 'a seemingly #basic pair of dark indigo denim that over time, with enough wear and tear, "comes out of the closet" to show [their] true colours' (*DIS*, April 2014) (see Figure 119); as well as 'The W4W Buzz' (Figure 120), a cliché-ridden

‘lesbian visibility barbershop poster’ packaged with an article by Katerina Llanes about Judith Butler and queer commentary (*DIS*, November 2010). Both of these pieces mock simplistic binary representations of sexual orientation, gender and marginalised groups.

^{xxviii} Admittedly, there remains an uncomfortably large culture of sexuality- and gender-related bullying (particularly transphobia, misogyny and homophobia) online, not least on personal social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. However, the ability to explore queer identities secretly through anonymising outlets such as *Second Life* (see Section Eight) or safely through applications aimed specifically at non-heteronormative audiences such as *Grindr* means that playing with gender is, on the whole, less intimidating and less afflicted by the potential for intolerance on the Internet.

^{xxix} Another hip-hop artist whose work is preoccupied with both queer commentary and the role that the web plays in the construction of identities is Lelf. Although not as immediately avant-garde in his approach as Mykki Blanco, Lelf remains an interesting figure. He is openly gay, and his sexuality is referenced throughout his raps as a device through which he emotively attacks and subverts the homophobia rife in mainstream hip-hop. Where Blanco’s lyrics are playful in their fluidity, Lelf’s are frequently vitriolic and antagonistic, insisting that ‘I am whatever you say I am/Stop worrying about how gay I am’ (Snoad, August 2013) in response to the homophobic slurs that have marred hip-hop’s lyrical history. While he claims to be disinterested in the ‘political’ element of queer theory, he has admitted to enjoying blurring traditional gender roles. See, for instance, the 2012 video for ‘Wut’, which features a subversively ‘objectified white straight male’ (Brown, March 2014), thus supplanting the autonomous gaze from heteronormative white men to marginalised queer groups. His videos even critique the tradition for ‘booty culture’ in hip-hop by highlighting Lelf’s own voguing skills, with the rapper also clearly drawing links between his music and that of the queer ballroom cultures discussed in Section Nine (Snoad, August 2013). As with Blanco, however, it is not just gender and queering that drive Lelf’s work. He is also interested in the impact that over-exposure to digital technology has on the Post-Internet generation. Echoing Blanco, Lelf defines himself as an ‘alien from the NYC’ (ibid), again invoking a term associated with the science fictions of posthumanism. He references the same hyper-futuristic anime/bondage/*kawaii* imagery located in the fashion trends of Hood By Air and *GHE20G0TH1K* (Viteri, September 2013; see also the appropriation of *Pokémon* imagery in Figure 121) and engages in many Post-Internet subcultures, most prominently #seapunk (a post-millennial artistic style built around a ‘dream of the concept of a punk at sea’ [Vogt, 2012]). The style is notable for its web-specificity, and Lelf was heavily involved in the creation of #seapunk-related ‘Facebook groups and memes’ (ibid). This, coupled with the fact that his producers include comparable Post-Internet artists to those of Blanco (with Nguzunguzu being a shared example), stresses the importance that the Internet has held in the construction of Lelf’s ‘alien’ identity. Lelf’s own production style is hyper-digital and abstract, with this impressionistic approach being amplified by track titles on his 2012 mixtape *Dark York* that embrace the proliferation of symbols, emojis and abbreviations in web culture (‘ΩΩΩ’, ‘☀_☀’, ‘Hate2Wait’, ‘Wut’). This use of symbols could be read as a further example of the linguistic deconstruction that marks the work of Burroughs, Eshun and the CCRU. Indeed, the increasing prominence of emojis in popular culture more generally (see Doble, 2015; Cooper, 2015; Schwartz, 2015; Howse, 2015; and Brand, 2015) can be read as a sign of the Post-Internet generation formulating its own malleable cyborgian language, freed from the limitations of the organic written/spoken word. Lelf is good friends with Hood By Air designer Shayne Oliver, openly acknowledging that they share similar ‘cultural themes’ – including an interest in queering, Post-Internet issues and *DIS Magazine* – and asserts that his idols are all from *MySpace* (Brown, March 2014). These self-conscious comments in his interviews highlight the way in which his identity has been shaped by the digital spaces that he inhabits.

^{xxx} Shorey illuminates female rappers exhibiting queer identity such as Cunt Mafia, Junglepussey and Dai Burger in his 2015 article ‘Queer Rap is not Queer Rap’. He argues that ‘queer rap’, a popular term used to connect the multiple diverse artists listed above, is a reductionist ‘sub-genre’ that serves only to reinforce a binary opposition between heterosexual (predominantly male) and LGBTQ rappers. Lelf is also notably dismissive of the term (Brown, March 2014). While the phrase has pretensions toward being complimentary, seemingly shedding light on a group of otherwise marginalised artists, in actuality

The reason these queer hip-hop artists are held up to a different standard has little to do with their generic classification and their talent and way more to do with homophobia and racism. By many metrics, these artists are better than what passes for, ostensibly, their mainstream competition, but their success is not proportional. With all this talk about how to talk about these artists, it’s easy to forget the quality and subtleties of the music itself. It’s also important to remember that discussions of rap by queer or gay artists tend to be unfairly focused on queer and gay men (Shorey, 2015)

Shorey is correct in his assertion that the use of ‘queer rap’ as a genre title is simply a method of separating rappers that identify as LGBTQ from their heterosexual ‘mainstream opposition’, and it is a term that I have carefully elected not to employ in this thesis. However, this does not mean that the deliberate and self-conscious explorations of queer identity – or, as he puts it, ‘genderqueering nuances’ (ibid) – located in these musicians’ work does not merit analysis in this thesis.

^{xxxi} For another example of this blurring of genders/identities through the combination of melodic vocals and disruptive digital tracks see Hood By Air contributor Ian Isiah’s *The Love Champion* (2013), which features production by Mykki Blanco/Le1f-associated producers such as Brenmar and Gobby and involves a self-consciously exaggerated use of autotune (a technique referred to in Section Eight and the conclusion of this thesis). It is also worth investigating Dan Bodan’s *Soft* (2014), produced by musicians such as 18+, Physical Therapy and M.E.S.H. (all illuminated in this thesis) and latterly remixed and disassembled by information noise producers including Lotic, Elysia Crampton, KABLAM and Gobby (focused on in Section Nine) on the follow-up EP *Softy Soft Vol. 2* (2015).

^{xxxii} Although she is not examined in the main text of this thesis, the work of Grimes is also worthy of note. A self-described ‘Post-Internet’ (Chew-Bose, May 2011) vocalist and musician, she is clearly informed by the fashion of digital queer artists, with her ever-changing hairstyles, industrial piercings and ‘Day-Glo’ costumes (Battan, February 2012) evoking the style of Hood By Air as well as the trends that defined cyberpunk (see her appearance on the cover of *Dazed & Confused* magazine in Figure 122). Grimes’ entire public persona appears to be an embodiment of the concepts of digital queering. Her aesthetic is one that embraces the ‘glitchy and glossy’ sounds of a ‘hyper-digital’ existence (ibid), and she has spoken about the role that the Internet has played in forming both her identity and her appreciation for music (Chew-Bose, May 2011). This again amplifies the personal relationship that so many of the musicians analysed in this thesis have to Post-Internet concepts, and emphasises the ways in which these aspects of their ‘real life’ identities manifest themselves in their digital art and self-presentations. Her neo-cyberpunk image echoes the posthuman way in which her identity has been shaped by the web’s constant presence in her life. Weiner argues that the inconsistencies in her music are expressive of web culture as a whole, and of the fact that individuals inhabit multiple separate identities online:

The songs off *Visions* [...] sound like how we connect and experience the world online. There’s a webby, networked aura to the echoing, trippy beats and layered vocals. [...] Her lyrics hint at a future where everything is seemingly up for grabs, with culture opening up in a way it never has before. Previously rigid categories of gender, sexuality, subculture, and cultural history are all accessible simultaneously, allowing for a playground of self-representation in which anyone with Internet access can participate. This is what meme culture is building up to, and this is why so many young people identify so strongly with Grimes. Her music and aesthetic doesn’t feel like a static masterpiece, but something any creatively inclined person could emulate, tweak, and expand on – a Meme Generator for art (Weiner, December 2012)

Grimes’ sound and persona replicate this ‘playground of self-representation’ by emphasising the fluidity of identity online. She exploits the notion of the ‘meme culture’ in which styles and genres develop through the interaction of many web users, indicating that her own music is mutable and designed to be ‘tweaked’ by her fans. Her malleable identity, celebration of the Internet’s role in developing her personality, and evincing of aesthetics that relate to various online subcultures provide a full and authentic image of Post-Internet cultural experience. These fluctuations and inconsistencies are reiterated in her statements regarding gender, which she believes to be far more ambiguous than a simple binary opposition between masculinity and femininity (Battan, February 2012). She explains that she is ‘not, like, transgendered’ (ibid) but acknowledges the importance of styles appropriated from a variety of queer sources in her music, illuminating the fact that explorations of digital queer identity are not confined to the work of musicians that self-define as LGBTQ. As a fairly commercially successful artist (Grimes is a frequent topic for discussion in large e-zines such as *Pitchfork*) she is capable of reaching a larger audience with her consideration of identity in the Post-Internet era and therefore offers a relatively visible illustration of the ways in which many of these issues are developing in music as a whole. Grimes has become a critical figure in subcultural blogging scenes, inspiring taste cultures online and adorning the covers of trend-setting magazines (as in the example from *Dazed & Confused*). She is an interesting example of a musician with wider cultural recognition taking the notion of Post-Internet digital queering into more mainstream discourses. For a further example of this approach to digital queer themes and aesthetics, see the ambiguous and androgynous work of Norwegian feminist composer, vocalist, songwriter and producer Jenny

Hval (particularly her albums *Viscera* [2011], *Innocence Is Kinky* [2013] and *Apocalypse, Girl* [2015], as well as her gender-blurring live performances).

^{xxxiii} Raftery's 'Music: The Sound of Cylons' (which appeared in *Wired* in March 2009) offers a brief but useful timeline of the introduction of digital technology into popular music vocals. He refers to key dates such as 1971, when the vocoder was used in the soundtrack to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1971); 1972-1974, when Stevie Wonder, Kraftwerk, Peter Dinklage and others began to exploit the sound of the 'talk box'; 1997's public release of autotune and Cher's subsequent 1998 hit 'Believe', which featured the technology prominently; and the late-2000s proliferation of autotune within genres such as hip-hop (most exaggeratedly in the output of Kanye West, analysed in the conclusion of this thesis), R&B and alt-folk (Raftery, March 2009). This indicates that the fusion of vocals and digital technology is certainly not a new occurrence, and has indeed been a crucial element in the work of multiple successful popular musicians throughout the past forty years.

^{xxxiv} Harper's study of vocal experiments (Harper, July 2014) highlights Auner's ideas in more depth, focusing primarily on the emotion involved in the vocal science of Hyperdub producer Burial and the rising use of vocaloids in electronic music. Burial 'uses speaking voices to populate his imaginary, dilapidated environments, as well as chopping and stitching singing samples together to create entirely new singing voices' (ibid). These vocals are rendered androgynous as female voices are deepened while male voices are heightened, granting them a surreal element due to their dehumanising gender fluctuations. Their ungendered pleas and revelations are among the most emotive vocals in contemporary music due to the erasure of limiting human traits such as irony. Of course, Burial's anonymity (outlined in Section Six) contributes yet further to the ethereality of these digitised vocals, as there is no visible persona to whom the voices can be attributed. This allows for a particularly evocative sonic rendering of the mutable posthuman, unmoored by gender stereotypes or definitions. These themes reached their climax with Burial's 2013 EP *Rival Dealer* (Hyperdub), on which the producer's re-pitched vocals express very literal support for an unbounded queering of identities. This is exemplified in the repeated use of (androgynous) samples stating 'This is who I am' and 'It's about sexuality/It's about showing a person who you are/To me, this is who I'm about', alongside an extended homage to transgender filmmaker Lana Wachowski at the closure of final track 'Come Down To Us'. Burial's style, which fuses vocal science with themes of digital queering and anonymity, has clearly inspired the work of the Post-Internet musicians analysed in Section Eight. Vocaloids, which have become a popular tool for musicians working online, are similarly emotive in their synthetic nature. Vocaloids 'offer the user the chance to create a voice that can sing both melodies and lyrics, based on "sound banks" recorded by human singers' (ibid). However, 'vocaloids don't quite sound realistic' despite the human agency behind these recordings, which is a trait that renders them just as surreal as Burial's creations (ibid). As if to amplify the uncanny nature of vocaloids, in Japanese pop music it is becoming increasingly common for them to be 'personified with given names, images (which typically appear on album covers), even ages and weights' (ibid), with these pseudo-human qualities merely serving to enhance the synthetic aspects of the tools' sounds (see, for example, the image of vocaloid Hatsune Miku in Figure 123). Producers exploit vocaloids as emotive devices, splintering their voices into shards in ways that evoke the diva sampling of 1990s house music.

^{xxxv} Holly Herndon has even developed a manifesto (alongside Mat Dryhurst and visual artist Metahaven) for Post-Internet existence, celebrating the symbiotic role that digital technology holds within contemporary life in the non-lyrics to 2015 track 'Interference' (the words are visualised in the song's video but are not audible in the track itself): 'Holding hands, let's shape/The personal, is geopolitical. [...] New fantasies, all at once/We will find an exit/New ways to love' (Herndon, Dryhurst and Metahaven, 2015). These abstract phrases all suggest the same problematic love-hate relationship with cybernetic technology that motivate 'Home', along with an understanding that the current generation is at one with their digital devices. Herndon, Dryhurst and Metahaven believe that authentic Post-Internet art must explore this phenomenon directly.

^{xxxvi} Similarly, the video for 'Double Helix' (2012) features a steadicam shot of a car's dashboard, focused entirely on the space that would usually house a satellite navigation system (Figure 124). Instead, the audience is faced with a video-within-a-video as MC Ride appears on the dashboard screen, contorting his body and facial features into inhuman shapes. Ride has been so hybridised by digital technology that he exists within an alternative visual realm; there are several symbolic screens between him and the audience. The music is comparable to that of 'Guillotine (It Goes Yah)', slowly collapsing in on itself while the lyrics and samples frequently cut out mid-phrase as if they are being disrupted. This is partially an echo of poor web connections and glitching MP3s, which further highlights the ways in which every aspect of Death Grips' art attempts to symbolise the various different aspects of contemporary music culture. It also advances the notion of an unstable identity that is incapable of making coherent or complete statements. Indeed, the abstraction of identity in the

Post-Internet era is taken to even greater extremes in videos such as ‘Birds’ (2013), which is comprised entirely of CGI and computer-aided-design (CAD) graphics. Beginning with the likeness of a coffin spinning on an axis, suggesting the death of identity from the outset, the clip then presents a selection of provocative sexual images (including two sex cells combining, an erupting pipe, and a statue-esque woman in a state of ecstasy), rendered robotic and, ultimately, non-sensual by the animation (Figure 125). Death Grips are asserting that even death and sexuality have become synthetic online, leaving nothing but sterilised, technological symbols of lust. This is a clear contrast to the abstract celebration of sexuality and gender found in, for instance, the work of Arca.

^{xxxvii} This reading of GIF animations is also found in Mark Fisher’s analysis of the 2010s Chicago club genre footwork, which is defined by its use of exaggeratedly repetitive vocal samples and beats (Fisher, October 2013). Fisher asserts that the hyper-saturated culture of the ‘twenty-first century is perhaps best captured in the “bad” infinity of the animated GIF, with its stuttering, frustrated temporality’, and that the sounds of the late DJ Rashad and his fellow footwork producers self-consciously draw on this in the ‘time-trap’ loops of their vocal science (ibid).

^{xxxviii} These are themes that have been exhibited in Post-Internet art more widely. See, for instance, the website *cloaque.org*, curated by artists Claudia Maté and Carlos Sáez, which is self-described as ‘a digital landfill [that] is the result of the collection, treatment and joining together of a series of images found online, to create a column of digital compost’ (Maté and Sáez, undated). The amalgamation of a vast quantity of digital images from apparently unrelated sources that comprises this virtual installation echoes the detritus and ‘trash’ of information noise culture (Figure 126), and is designed to represent the impact of these cultural influences on the everyday lives of the Post-Internet generation.

^{xxxix} Fatima Al Qadiri’s album *Genre Specific Xperience* (2011) develops a hyper-digital environment while simultaneously subverting established genre boundaries. The record appropriates ‘juke, hip-hop, dubstep, electro-tropicalia, and ’90s-era Gregorian trance’ (Benns, 2011), combining these genres with the kitsch sounds and images of vaporwave. ‘Hip-Hop Spa’, for example, crosses trap beats with glossy high-definition textures to formulate a soundscape that juxtaposes the genre referenced in the track’s title with new-age relaxation instrumentals, while ‘Vatican Vibes’ offers a hyper-digital take on Gregorian trance in a style that is evocative of Visionist’s sampled choral techniques. Indeed, Al Qadiri collaborated with Visionist on 2013’s *I’m Fine*. The difference between the two artists lies in the fact that Al Qadiri utilises digital vocal pads instead of human samples on a keyboard, which amplifies the cybernetic element (as opposed to Visionist’s ethereal style) in a similar way to the output of Nguzunguzu and Jam City. The lack of organic material in her work makes it more dystopian in its evocation of digital existence than the beautiful constructions of Visionist. Al Qadiri’s work as a whole has centred on her ‘interpretation of existing genre’ tropes (Al Qadiri, thesis interview, 2014), paying homage to the multiple influences that she experiences online and rendering them increasingly digital. According to Benns, Al Qadiri’s music videos are preoccupied with ‘the isolation of the Internet’ (Benns, 2011). Clips for tracks such as ‘D-Medley’ (2012, see Figure 127) and ‘How Can I Resist U’ (2011) draw on ‘stock film footage and computer graphics images’ as well as clichéd sexualised presentations of Middle-Eastern women (ibid), and are created by *DIS* associates including Sophia Al Maria, Tabor Robak and Ryan Trecartin. The 2011 video for ‘Vatican Vibes’ takes the style to extremes: it is built entirely from virtual clips of a 1990s-style video game and early-web-era personal computers (Figure 128). The use of these visuals seems kitschy and clichéd when compared with contemporary developments in digital technology, especially when considered alongside the ironic work of vaporwave musicians and PC Music (a genre and a label that Al Qadiri has interestingly admitted that she is not a fan of, as stressed in Sections Two, Three and Five). These are screens from the past, and the synthetic nature of computing and communications technology means that aesthetic datedness occurs rapidly. These outmoded interfaces do not become comforting or nostalgic, contrasting with the trend that Reynolds and Morley argue sees retromanic audiences seek solace from overbearing information and communication channels in authentic ‘analogue’-era cultural materials (see Section One). Instead, Al Qadiri celebrates the web’s oversaturation of cultural material and restructuring of temporal, spatial and genre-based boundaries, rather than attempting to escape from it. This renders her work more authentic to the Post-Internet experience than music that retreats into retrospective nostalgia.

^{xl} Future Brown’s live performances take these motifs further still, with different collaborations depending on the city that houses each show. During their debut 2014 performance in London, for instance, they collaborated with grime artists Ruff Sqwad and Riko Dan, while their show later that year at Art Basel featured R&B vocalists Kelela and Ian Isiah and experimental DJ Total Freedom. While these shows may differ in terms of personnel, and inevitably in terms of vocal sound, they remain true to the Future Brown aesthetic of shifting patterns of influence and genre cross-pollination.

^{xli} *GHE20G0TH1K* also has strong links to #KUNQ, a set of Boston-based musicians with an interest in making queer club music political and sociological. Comprised of producers/DJs Battyjack, False Witness, Micah, Stud1nt and Rizzla (who is also an academic with a focus on trans-global queer cultures and the international spread of vogue), the collective aims to break down boundaries between identities and genres in post-millennial club scenes. They deliberately avoid ‘gentrified terms’ and intrinsically connect clubs to digital spaces, communicating on social media via the ‘#KUNQ’ hashtag (False Witness, quoted in *Fact*, 2015). This word is a portmanteau, fusing the countercultural mentality of ‘punk’, the celebratory ballroom term ‘kunt’, and the sparse, lo-fi Southern USA hip-hop genre ‘crunk’ into a decidedly fluid but hyper-political aesthetic and style (ibid).

^{xlii} These aesthetics can also be found in many mixes by these DJs, including Venus X and Shayne’s *The Cruellest Intentions* (2011), Lotic’s *Funny Games* (2014), Djwww and Sentinel’s *Designer Environments* (2015), M.E.S.H.’s *Functions of the Now VII* (2014), Rabbit’s on-going *Pandemic Transmission* mix series (2014–), and Total Freedom’s *Free Pass Mixfile 4 Dummy* (2013) and *10,000 Screaming Faggots* (created alongside Dutch E Germ and Juliana Huxtable for Hood By Air in 2014). They are also located in briefer compositions and tracks such as Physical Therapy’s ‘Call Me Maybe vs. Mad Drumz’ (2012), Arca’s 2014 reworking of Shakira’s 2005 hit ‘Hips Don’t Lie’, Total Freedom’s ‘Hunter’s Tale or Rihanna Stalking Rihanna with a Joey Jordison(TM) Torch’ (2012) and Lotic’s ‘From The Front (Feat. Dr. Luke, Rabbit, Sugur Shane, DJ Karfox, Big Hud, Fat Pimp)’ (2014); the latter of which is accompanied on *SoundCloud* by the deliberately naïve-sounding description ‘I fucked around with several files until there was a cute new one :}’.

^{xliii} SETH, Gobby and Jamie Krasner’s collaborative pop project, is a further example of this. The project masquerades as a traditional male-female pop duo, with Gobby producing and Krasner singing, but its palette is far too close to Gobby’s hyperactive abstract collage to be truly mistaken for the commercially viable sounds of pop. Instead, SETH’s debut EP *Chick On The Moon* (2013) samples from a multitude of different sources, but blends and distorts the selected excerpts to such an extreme degree that they continue Gobby’s theme of decontextualising all accessible material. Krasner’s vocals, meanwhile, are almost inhuman due to the vast amount of post-production inflicted on them, which evokes the vocal science techniques examined in Section Eight and the work of the collage-like producers in Section Nine. Gobby admitted that ‘there’s a lot more balance and direction’ in SETH’s sound compared to his solo material, which results in a more ‘focused [...] pop sort of folksy thing’ (ibid). However, he also added that he continues to lean ‘way hard into the more fucked up territory’ while producing for the project, resulting in music and videos (one was made for each of their debut EP’s tracks, with 2013’s ‘Don’t Open Your Make’ featured in Figure 129) that are arguably even more challenging than his solo output due to their unfulfilled initial promises of melody and consistency (ibid).

^{xliv} An artist whose work offers a dystopian view of the dominance of screens in Post-Internet culture outlined by van Dijk is Daniel Lopatin, who is interested in creating ‘demanding environments’ comprised of ‘new sequences, new heterogeneous textures and new organisms’ as yet unheard/unseen (Harper, 18 October 2013). Lopatin has released music under his own name as well as the pseudonyms sunsetcorp and Oneohtrix Point Never. He is preoccupied with the themes provoked by information noise and the Post-Internet condition, with his employment of digital sonics placing him at the forefront of much journalistic analysis of contemporary musical exploration alongside James Ferraro, Holly Herndon and Laurel Halo (Cooper, Friedlander and Saxelby, September 2013). His two *YouTube* channels, named after the pseudonyms mentioned above, are both dedicated to studying the omniscience of screens and voyeurism in web culture (albeit in two very different ways). The sunsetcorp channel, which contains Lopatin’s oldest videos and generated his initial widespread recognition, gained prominence due to the 2009 video ‘Nobody Here’, which is representative of the aesthetics of most of the videos on that channel. Analysed extensively throughout Reynolds’ *Retromania*, the video was created during the 2000s ‘Internet’ era of nostalgia and referentiality that informs Reynolds’ arguments. Reynolds describes the clip as an ‘echo jam’,

built out of a tiny loop of vocal from Chris De Burgh’s ‘The Lady In Red’ and a vintage eighties computer-animation graphic called ‘Rainbow Road’. [It] became a hit in its own right, chalking up over thirty thousand hits over the course of several months. [Listeners] find themselves moved by the desolate yearning [and] the effect is an eerie melancholy (Reynolds, 2011, pp. 80–81)

It is retromantic and referential in its pastiche, constructed entirely from samples of other works of art. There is no real attempt by Lopatin to compose something that is ‘more than the sum of its parts’ (as with, for example, the collage-esque compositions in Section Nine). Yet Reynolds’ argument that the melancholic emotions

inspired by the clip are the result of a nostalgic and sentimental remembrance of the 1980s is a simplistic reading. In fact, the video evokes the loneliness of information noise culture discussed in Section Two. ‘There’s nobody here’, De Burgh’s sampled voice repeats again and again, reminding Post-Internet users of the potential for feelings of solitude and depression that can occur when spending too much time in a virtual space. Losing one’s self in these environments – in the ‘Internet wormhole’ described in *Retromania* (Reynolds, 2011, p. 83) – can be a morose and asocial experience (see Section Two, as well as Sanders, Field, Diego and Kaplan, 2000; and Kraut et al, 1998), and Lopatin’s deliberate combination of repetitive, reverb-laden sounds and images echoes this effectively. This is, in a way, Lopatin’s attempt to caution against the emotional and mental dangers of online spaces, while self-reflexively engaging with its culture of mash-ups and sampling.

This technophobic aesthetic, which evokes fears surrounding information noise (see Section Two, as well as Hargittai, Neuman and Curry, 2012; Jones, Ravid and Rafaeli, June 2004; Shenk, 1998; and Gitlin, 2002), is taken to greater extremes on Lopatin’s other *YouTube* account, Oneohtrix Point Never. OPN is the most self-consciously futuristic of Lopatin’s projects, stylistically foregrounding abstraction and coldness over sentimentality and musical hooks. Each of the videos created under this pseudonym invokes the web directly through the use of both ironic pastiche and cybernetic experimentation (see, for instance, the contrast between forebodingly abstract soundscapes and humorous emojis in the 2013 video for ‘Boring Angel’, or the deliberate juxtaposition of hyper-real digital animation with corporate logos in ‘Still Life (Excerpt)’, also from 2013), but it is perhaps his 2013 video for ‘Still Life (Betamale)’ that provides the clearest example of Lopatin’s critique of the omnipresence of screens in contemporary culture (see Figures 130-132). This video is comprised of clips of

disgustingly dirty computers and keyboards, screenshots of anime pornography, live-action shots of furies and other online fetishists, and a variety of other NSFW, Internet-enabled manifestations of human sexuality, violence, and general carnality – all presented through a hallucinatory digital aesthetic (Delanty and Stabler, September 2013)

The visuals in ‘Still Life (Betamale)’, as with ‘Nobody Here’, are primarily sampled from elsewhere, but in this case they are from contemporary digital sources. There is no attempt to evoke a bygone era, and there is no use of reverb or repetition. Indeed the selected sources, as indicated in the quote from Delanty and Stabler, are alienating, confrontational and disturbing. They do not promote sentimentality or melancholy like in Lopatin’s earlier work. The shock value is heightened through the abstract music, which is entirely synthetic and offers little that could be deemed conventionally warm or melodic, while the referenced visuals have been given even greater abstraction through the use of hallucinatory distortion and animation techniques throughout. The video is so explicit and disturbing, in fact, that it was removed from *YouTube* (although it remains viewable on other streaming sites such as *Vimeo*). This is all redolent of Lopatin’s belief in the alienating quality of a screen-dominated culture, and the fact that he sees a decrease in morality brought about by the increased freedoms that the web has generated. He is suggesting that the ability to access (and, subsequently, draw on) infinite material of varying degrees of dubious decency is creating problems for identity and ‘real life’ communication (this theme is clearly informed by the critiques of occasional collaborator James Ferraro outlined in Section Six). It is worth noting that Harper is critical of the clip due to its objectification of the fetish groups depicted within it (the video, he suggests, arguably becomes that which it claims to be condemning), and alleges that feelings of alienation and questions about contemporary morality existed long before the birth of the Internet or, indeed, the increasing prominence of the visual in the Post-Internet era (Harper, October 3 2013). He asserts that the clip ultimately amounts to an uncomfortably voyeuristic exploitation of the web and its subcultures, seeking to promote a schism between ‘reality’ and digital culture, or ‘us and them’ (ibid) in a way that is counter-productive to the ideas of Jurgenson (2012; 2014). In that sense, Harper is suggesting that the video is presented from a pre-Internet perspective that cannot comprehend the inseparability of the physical and the virtual in Post-Internet culture, instead portraying the web as a ‘foreign’ space. There is certainly an element of scopophilia involved with the clip, and it is true that many of the sources referenced appear to have been selected for reasons of controversy. However, what Harper fails to mention is the fact that the video is itself an online creation by a self-conscious Post-Internet artist, whose work to date has shown an affection for, not a distrust of, the Internet. Rather than simply exhibiting these subcultures for the enjoyment or revulsion of others, Lopatin seems to be presenting his own vision of the Post-Internet experience. His sonic textures and visual creations are viewed and fetishised online too, and he is identifying and critiquing the voyeuristic nature of all screen gazing (not just that of taboo cultures) through the extreme examples employed in the video. Oneohtrix Point Never is a product of the Post-Internet age and his work engages with it by drawing on its sounds and images, using controversy to question the Internet’s celebration of scopophilia (in a comparable way to 18+), interactivity and Post-Internet identity. There is no generational ‘schism’ here: OPN is actively exploring the everyday experiences of living in an era dominated by screens and defined by an ever-lessening gap between the physical and virtual.

^{xlv} One example of this approach in Post-Internet art is LaTurbo Avedon's online studio space *Club Rothko* (2015), which self-consciously illuminates the notion that the Internet has replaced the rave/club as the contemporary authentic subcultural space (see Section Four). Avedon's environment takes the form of a virtual nightclub (Figure 133), allowing her to explore 'various versions of my avatar identity' while breaking down the 'restrictions on what you can do in virtual (and online) environments [and the] edges of where games are intended to go or not' (Avedon, quoted in Palop, 2015).

^{xlvi} The members of Gatekeeper have drawn on audience interactivity and the visual aspects of the web throughout their career to date. They have released albums as 'official torrent[s]' via *Pirate Bay* (the subsequently shut down file-sharing torrent network) and deliberately over-share images on social media as a 'support [to] the general concerns and aesthetics [they] respond to in real time' (ADR, thesis interview, 2015). This enables them to project their artistic themes 'into the world, claiming that territory and garnering support for it from [their] community' and fan-base (ibid). It is clear that 'sharity' has played a significant role in Gatekeeper's work, with the increasing power of musical audiences (see Section Four) strongly inspiring the fluid distribution, promotion and exhibition of their output.

^{xlvii} There are multiple examples of this combination of auditory and visual themes being taken into increasingly experimental and visually alluring spaces, especially from musicians associated with *DIS Magazine*. See, for instance, the personal website of Fatima Al Qadiri (Figure 134), designed by *DIS* editor Nick Scholl, which is structured to resemble the folders of a personal computer. Navigating the site involves the time-consuming process of opening folder after folder to access information about her music and listen to samples of her genre-splicing sound (perhaps a reference to Reynolds' description of the Internet's archival 'rabbit hole' effect). *Thermal*, a 2014 construction by Teengirl Fantasy and 4REAL, is like a smaller, website-specific version of Gatekeeper's *Exo*, allowing the user to click-and-grab various images onscreen and move around hyper-virtual environments while listening to the music (Figure 135). It is designed to appeal specifically to Post-Internet audiences, offering no instructions and thus requiring an instinctive relationship with and understanding of the technology involved. As the press release notes, the site provides 'an opportunity to re-envision the web as a rich dynamic responsive world, [in which] users are invited to freely explore and study the environments without being locked into any particular goal or agenda' (*DIS*, November 2014). Jam City's 'Unhappy' a 2014 song that draws on issues regarding technophobia reminiscent of the work of James Ferraro, Laurel Halo and Gobby, was initially presented on a website that visually manifested the ideas raised in the song. As soon as the user reached the site, they immediately became overwhelmed by a vast quantity of pop-ups offering multiple products and forms of information that even blocked the *SoundCloud* visualiser of the tune itself (Figure 136). Many of these pop-ups advertised products promising Post-Internet web users the ability to maintain focus at all times and 'find out about' themselves online. TCF (a musician with connections to the collage-like style of Section Nine) created the evolving *TCFX* alongside web designers Remote and Tljtieue Bovitobenn in 2015 (Figure 137). This site allows users to ask questions about its creator and receive automated, often cryptically coded, responses (in a technique reminiscent of the tension between James Ferraro's mysterious anonymity and exaggerated transparency). TCF has produced a large quantity of audiovisual work (particularly from 2015 onwards) that deals with 'machine-human relationships' (Iadorola, February 2015). One example of this can be found in the enigmatic 2014 release *415C47197F78E811FEED7862288306EC4137FD4EC3DED8B*, which drew interest online when blogger Guy Birkin discovered 'unusual' visualisations in the final track '97 EF 9C 12 87 06 57 D8 B3 2F 0B 11 21 C7 B2 97 77 91 26 48 27 0E 5D 74' (Birkin, 2014). He realised that TCF had 'cut up' the frequencies in a very specific way, using 'a spectrogram plotted on a logarithmic scale', so that playing the song using the *Sonic Visualiser* software revealed 'a photograph of violence during political protests in Greece, 2011' (ibid). This extra visual aspect adds a further level of intrigue to the music, as well as suggesting a focus on international social politics in TCF's web-preoccupied work (Figure 138). Although his music has only recently gained recognition in popular music e-zines, his thematic approach and associations with *Janus* and *DIS Magazine* suggest that TCF could potentially become another key figure in the field of Post-Internet music. As he noted in his interview for this thesis, he 'started building web sites when [he] was thirteen' and has

always been interested in the lesser known parts of the Internet and it was natural that it would become a part of my practice. [...] It's becoming a central part in most people's lives. My main interest is the infrastructure and the technology that is behind the interface and that informs a lot of my practice. My research is a large part of my output. It's therefore as much of a personal response to this world and a testing ground to explore the boundaries of technology (TCF, thesis interview, 2015)

His aim in generating ‘chaotic’ web content such as *TCFX*, then, is a Post-Internet attempt to formulate ‘the idea of another identity that is a poor representation of me’ (ibid). This is a theme that is evocative of other abstract digital representations of Post-Internet identity discussed throughout this thesis. Further examples of immersive websites can be located in Kelela and Fade To Mind’s *Cut4.Me* (Figure 139) and PC Music and *Red Bull Music Academy*’s *Pop Cube* (Figure 140), both of which exhibit themes and aesthetics that enhance their respective sonic outputs.

^{xlviii} Other examples of this can be located in the symbolism of ‘I’m In It’, which uses violent and sexual imagery as a metaphor for the African-American Civil Rights Movement in confrontational lines such as ‘Put my fist in her like the Civil Rights sign’ and ‘Your titties, let ’em out/Free at last/Thank God almighty, they free at last’. Yet the strength of this message is weakened by its obvious misogyny, as well as an overarching trend toward puerile sexist and racist humour. See in particular the lyric ‘Eating Asian pussy/All I need is sweet and sour sauce’; a line that sees West falling into the same traps of prejudice and stereotyping that the track aims to critique by failing to escape the misogyny (as well as racism and puerility) that has afflicted much mainstream hip-hop (see Cundiff, 2013 and Soderberg, June 2013). Other inconsistencies can be found throughout the record, as on ‘New Slaves’, a track simultaneously featuring a guest turn from openly gay singer Frank Ocean and the repetition of the homophobic lyric ‘I’d rather be a dick than a swallower’ (notably, digital queer musician Arca is also present on the album).

^{xlix} UK grime star and celebrity figure Wiley also exploits social media in a way that is redolent of the work of Ferraro, Hype Williams and Lil B. Indeed, he has been the subject of a number of online think-pieces that connect his social networking activity to the same antagonistic approach that I argue is found in the work of Death Grips (Darnell, April 2013). Over a period of ten years, Wiley has been signed to Warner Bros.-associated labels twice, Virgin Records, Island Records and a selection of smaller labels, gaining a reputation for being stubborn and aggressive toward anyone that tries to curb his creative vision. The disputes that have arisen between Wiley and his labels frequently revolve around his prolific production rate. He has released vast quantities of music online during his career, which is indicative of the hyper-constant release schedules of many Post-Internet musicians (such as Lil B, James Ferraro, Hype Williams, Gobby, Death Grips, etc.). This typifies the impact of information noise, and is one of the reasons behind Reynolds’ critique of an oversaturated digital musical milieu built on quantity-over-quality (Reynolds, June 2011). However, major labels remain tied to outmoded systems of production and distribution, rarely releasing more than one album a year by a single artist and instead taking significant time to market that sole album internationally with music videos, interviews and tours. This is incompatible with the ‘sharity’-driven contemporary musical milieu outlined in Section Four, as the procedure limits the creative processes of many Post-Internet musicians (with their inevitably shortened attention spans) through its elongated timescales and insistence on stylistic consistency across discographies. Wiley wishes to become successful and recognises the importance of the majors in achieving that aim. However, he also acknowledges ‘that commercial hype will almost inevitably require the watering down treatment’, resulting in fewer releases and less opportunity to explore new sounds and genres (Darnell, April 2013). This has seen Wiley take to *Twitter* on numerous occasions to openly criticise his concurrent label, and has resulted in his frequent frustrated ‘leaking’ of unreleased albums online without these labels’ foreknowledge due to his annoyance at the outdated approach to scheduling that limits the mainstream system. Darnell references his ‘MJ Cole collaboration “From The Drop”’, on which Wiley voiced ‘his understandable frustration [at these labels]: “I’m giving out zip files like a virus/I wanna thank them fans/That knew I had very good plans/Had tons of music, album ready/But the label they didn’t understand”’ (ibid). Wiley is promoting the new malleable structures of distribution, interaction and curation that exist in the Post-Internet musical milieu, taking a provocative and antagonistic stance against major labels’ inability to maintain pace with an evolving (and quickening) milieu. This is clearly evocative of Death Grips’ election to leak their own work online despite the protests of their mainstream imprint, and authenticates Wiley with the experiences of audiences that have grown up within the Post-Internet musical milieu of ‘sharity’ and unfiltered release schedules.

¹ There are many other examples of mainstream musicians drawing on Post-Internet cultures. The experimental textures (produced by Noisecastle III) and cybernetic vocals on Dawn Richard’s *Blackheart* (2015) are comparable to Kelela’s output, and Richard (now going by the pseudonym DAWN) has since collaborated with various artists on the Fade To Mind roster. R&B star Drake frequently utilises Post-Internet producers in his work, and has authenticated his output by publicly aligning himself with artists such as rapper iLoveMakonnen (see the video for iLoveMakonnen’s 2014 single ‘Tuesday’ in Figure 141), who has been celebrated by figureheads of the digital queer aesthetic such as Wu Tsang (Tsang, December 2014). Wiley has welcomed remixes from the Hype Williams-associated producer Actress (2015), whose playful social media presence and abstract sounds evoke the work of James Ferraro and Visionist respectively, as well as anonymous social

networking producer Zomby (2015). Commercially successful stars including Madonna, Diplo and Charlie XCX have all elected to collaborate with PC Music's SOPHIE. A\$AP Rocky, a high-profile hip-hop artist, was a strong public promoter of Hood By Air for some time (modelling HBA while performing at the label's fashion shows, as in Figure 142), so much so that he courted significant controversy online when he aggressively severed ties with Shayne Oliver in his 2014 single 'Multiply'. Commercially successful hip-hop collectives including the USA's Odd Future, South Africa's Die Antwoord and Sweden's Yung Lean & The Sad Boys use social media, *YouTube*, themes of digital queering, and platforms such as the animated television network [*adult swim*] to connect and identify with their Post-Internet audiences (Figures 143-145). UK funky/dubstep producers LV celebrated the pan-global nature of contemporary musical channels of influence on *Sebenza* (Hyperdub, 2012), a collaborative album that featured South African kwaito rappers embracing their symbiotic relationship to digital technology through lyrics such as Okmalumkoolkat's 'I'm a Zulu computer/Last name Macintosh, everything's super/iPhone, accident/Robocop, accent/Taxi driver, dialects/Wi-Fi, direct'. 'Both', a 2015 track by rapper Yung Jake, evoked P. Morris' *Beloved* in its communal presentation, as fans were required to add the rapper on the visual communication smartphone app *Snapchat* in order to view it alongside a friend. This is apt given that Yung Jake's press releases frequently employ Post-Internet language such as 'Yung Jake was born on the Internet in 2011'. UK terrestrial television network Channel 4 publicly aligned itself with the digital queer aesthetic in December 2014, effectively hijacking the commercial break of rival network ITV's flagship music reality television programme *The X-Factor* with the video for 'Prototype', a cyborgian celebration of prostheses by 'the world's first bionic pop artist' (and queer fetishist) Viktoria Modesta (Figure 146).

^{li} In a different but comparable example, the release of U2's *Songs of Innocence* album (Island, 2014) courted controversy, even outside of Post-Internet subcultures, due to its overwhelming condemnation by music fans and media outlets alike for equating to corporate 'spam' and being redolent of 'Big Brother intrud[ing] on our lives' (Assar, September 2014). The 9 September 2014 release, which involved the band and Apple conspiring to place the album without warning or consent on every Apple device in public usage, was Post-Internet in its exploitation of technology and inference that 'everyone' has a portable communication device. Yet it did not garner the same reputation for authenticity that, say, Beyoncé's unannounced release received. While both promotional strategies are innovative and highly contemporary in style, *Beyoncé* is presented in a way that celebrates the web-based nature of the singer's audience (through its visual accompaniments) and contains collaborations with under-exposed 'bedroom producers' and vocalists such as Boots (who has worked with Kelela and FKA twigs, among others): producers whose work had only previously been acknowledged by those closely following the blogging milieu. She even selected #seapunk originator DJ Lil Internet (credited in the liner notes as @LILINTERNET in reference to his *Twitter* username) to direct the video for the album's track 'No Angel'. U2 make no such concessions to Post-Internet cultures: its members do not use social networks such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* and seemingly have little interest in referencing them in their work. The album is largely conventional in its stylistic approach (unlike *Yeezus*, for example), formed primarily of rock ballads with little attempt to engage with Post-Internet audiences through experimental sounds, imagery or interactive elements. As such, the release strategy was deemed little more than a corporate marketing technique (fuelled, naturally, by U2's relationship to Apple) designed to sell an album by a band whose biggest success was in the 1980s and 1990s; an album that thus had little or no connection to the largely youthful audience that it was, ultimately, forced upon. Apple consumers had no choice about whether it would appear on their smartphones/tablets, which resulted in fears about viruses and, as mentioned, the same 'Big Brother' surveillance culture that drives Holly Herndon's output (ibid). Indeed, reception was so overwhelmingly negative that Apple was eventually forced to introduce a function that allowed audiences to straightforwardly remove the album from their devices. As noted throughout this thesis, digital technology is a symbiotic and prosthetic element of Post-Internet youths' psyches and identities, and the infringement by this commercial band and corporation was treated like a physical assault on the privacy of iPhone users.

^{lii} Electro-pop singer-songwriter Imogen Heap was praised in 2015 by the mainstream media for her apparent role as a 'saviour of the music industry' due to her innovative methods of distributing music online (Bartlett, 2015). In an interview with *The Guardian*, she outlined various progressive plans to ensure that capital from music sales was more fairly distributed among musicians through a restructured system of ownership and copyright (ibid). Her efforts and ideas proved less popular with many Post-Internet artists and musicians, however, who believed that she was effectively using her public image to exploit the work of talented but underexposed engineers and practitioners that had helped to develop many of the formats she was taking credit for. Holly Herndon collaborator Mat Dryhurst tweeted in response that 'Imogen Heap taking credit [for] community working on art on the *Blockchain* is at odds with the crucial ethos of ideas pointing to [their] orig[inal] source' (Dryhurst, 7 September 2015), indicating that there is substantial hypocrisy in attempting to

return artistic ownership to musicians while simultaneously neglecting to credit the ‘original source’ of her ideas. As he further argued, it ‘drives me crazy this mythology of spritely artist “intuiting” engineering principles in some psychedelic stupor. [...] Revolutionary ideas must come from outside of existing power structures’ (ibid). Musician TCF agreed, noting that Heap failed to mention influential technologies and individuals that had clearly inspired her ideas. He stated that ‘the problem with this article is the “saviour” aspect. [...] I welcome any initiative. Just be modest with what you are claiming in respect of the community’ (TCF, 9 September 2015). Heap’s ideas may well be positive for independent contemporary musicians, but she is perceived to have outlined their potential in a way that undercuts the Post-Internet milieu and instead maintains a top-down system of discourse and practice. In order for her ideas to be authentic to the Post-Internet milieu (and, as Dryhurst puts it, ‘truly revolutionary’) they ‘must come from outside’ of the ‘existing power structures’ of which Heap is a part. She must be seen to ‘respect [the] community’ or ‘original source’ that assisted in the construction and conception of these ideas, rather than rewriting the concepts as her own creations and claiming singular authorial ‘saviour’ status.